

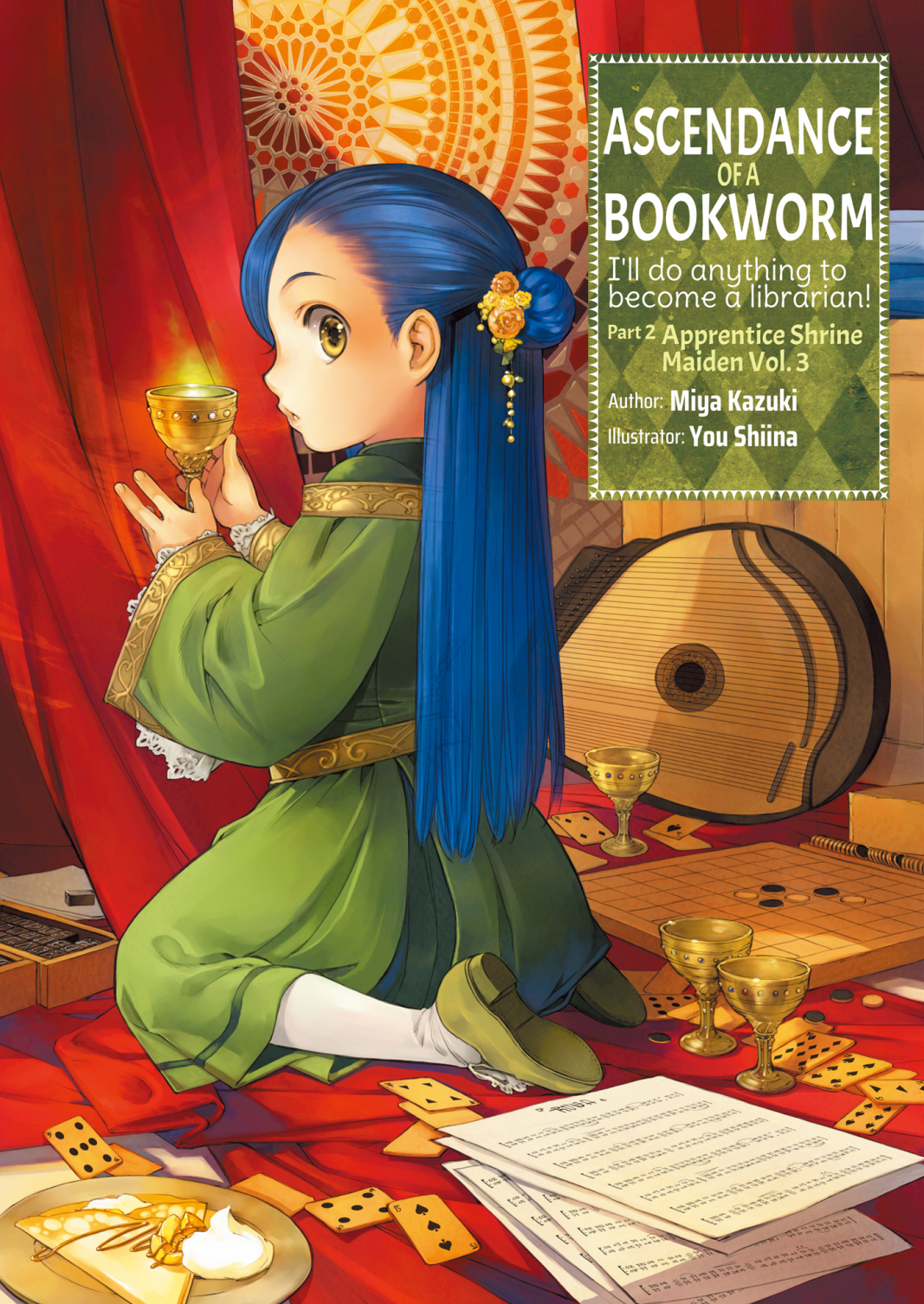
ASCENDANCE OF A BOOKWORM

I'll do anything to
become a librarian!

Part 2 Apprentice Shrine
Maiden Vol. 3

Author: **Miya Kazuki**

Illustrator: **You Shiina**





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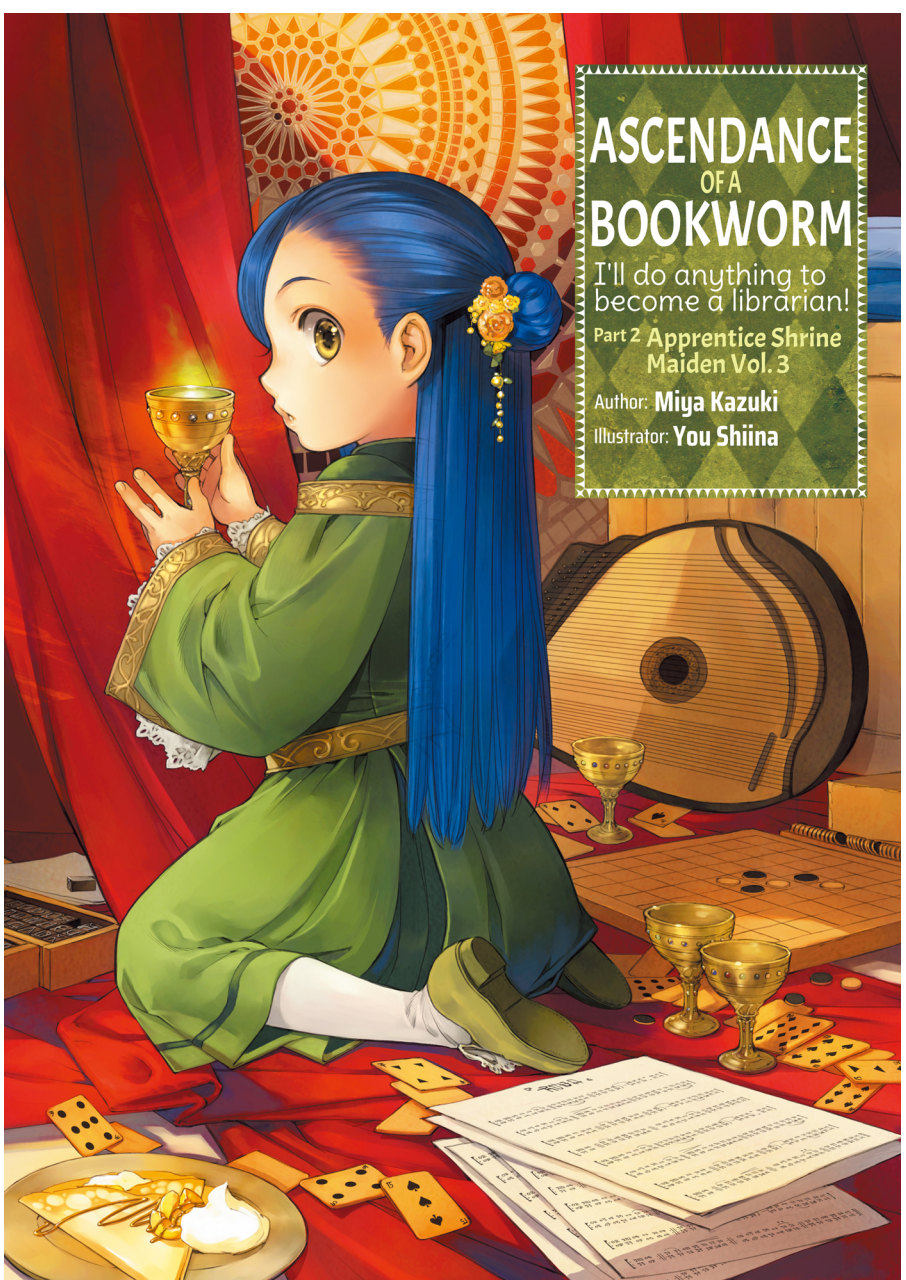
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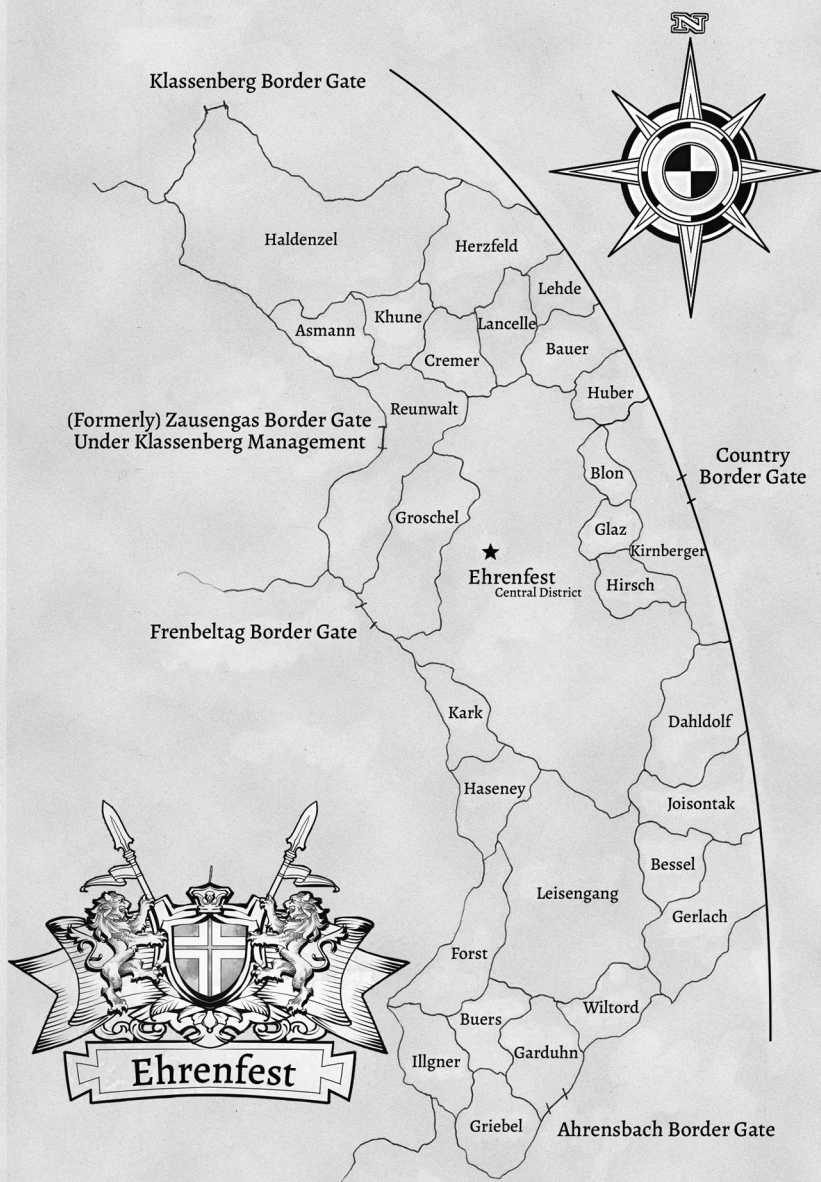
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Myne's Family



Myne

The protagonist, a daughter of a soldier who often collapses from fevers. She learned that her Devouring heat is mana and became an apprentice blue shrine maiden, a position normally restricted to nobles. She will do anything to read books.



Gunther

Myne's father, a captain at the south gate. He loves his family so much it makes everyone exasperated.

Effa

Myne's mother who works at a dye workshop. Always struggling to keep her loose-cannon husband and daughters under control.



Tuuli

Myne's older sister, an apprentice seamstress who is kind and takes care of others. According to Myne, she is "totally an angel."



Cast of Characters

Summary of Part One:

A girl who adores books named Urano was reincarnated as Myne, a poor and sickly child. The world has a low literacy rate and paper is too expensive to buy, so she set out on a quest to make her own books, and eventually made her own plant paper. Upon coming of age, she discovered a room of books in the local temple. She immediately decided to become an apprentice shrine maiden, both to get her hands on the books and to use the magic tools there to survive her mysterious illness known as the Devouring.

Gilberta Company



Lutz

An apprentice at the store. Myne's friend, partner in crime, and her reliable health manager.



Benno

The chief of the Gilberta Company and Myne's business mentor and guardian.



Corinna

Benno's younger sister and the heir to the store. She's a talented seamstress with her own workshop.

Mark

A leherl (employee) at the store. Benno's skilled right-hand man.

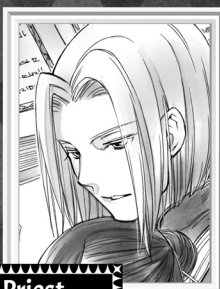
High Bishop

The highest authority in the temple. He hates the commoner Myne because she Crushed him with her mana.



High Priest

Myne's guardian in the temple. He values her talent in math and large amount of mana.



The Temple

Fran

Myne's skilled head attendant. Used to serve the High Priest.

Gil

Used to be a problem child, but is now working hard running the Myne Workshop.

Delia

A spy sent by the High Bishop. Says "Geez!" a lot.

Wilma

A gray shrine maiden with a talent for art.

Rosina

A gray shrine maiden with a talent for music.

Karstedt...Captain of Ehrenfest's Knight's Order. **Hugo**...A chef hired by Benno.

Damuel...A knight that guards Myne in the temple. **Ella**...An apprentice chef hired by Benno.

Sylvester...The blue priest that accompanied Myne during Spring Prayer.

Johann...A skilled apprentice at the smithy.

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Prologue

“Lord Karstedt, your visitor Lord Ferdinand has arrived.”

Upon receiving the announcement from one of his attendants, Karstedt made his way to the parlor. There he found his first wife, Elvira, and his eldest son, Ekehard, engaged in a friendly chat with Ferdinand. Karstedt couldn’t help but grin at how clear their reverence for the man was; only a few nobles still admired Ferdinand after he had been sent to the temple, and it was good to see his family among them.

“Lord Ferdinand,” welcomed Karstedt, and Ferdinand turned around. After they exchanged greetings and seated themselves, their attendants began setting the table. “I hate to interrupt your conversation, but Lord Ferdinand and I need to talk alone.”

Karstedt received no more than dissatisfied glares from Elvira and Ekehard, but when Ferdinand waved a hand and said “This is highly confidential,” they both left at once. The way they treated Ferdinand with more respect than him would have frustrated Karstedt had he not been so used to it.

As soon as wine and food had been placed on the table their attendants left as well, leaving Karstedt and Ferdinand alone in the room. Only once the door was firmly shut did Karstedt relax, switching to the casual tone he was used to using with his old friend.

“Sorry to make you come to my place instead of the castle, Ferdinand. Things haven’t been pretty over there.”

Karstedt picked up his silver glass and took a sip to show it wasn’t poisoned, then gestured at Ferdinand, who promptly raised the glass to his lips and took a drink as well. His mouth crinkled with approval, showing that the wine was to his liking.

“I imagined they wouldn’t be. Shikza’s mother is causing a fuss and complaining to everyone who will listen, no? The High Bishop has been throwing a tantrum of his own about it.” Ferdinand was right, leaving Karstedt no choice but to nod with a wry smile.

Ten days ago during a standard trombe extermination mission, Karstedt—the captain of the Knight’s Order—had assigned Shikza and Damuel to guard the apprentice blue shrine maiden. They possessed much less mana than the other knights present, and neither of them had firsthand experience exterminating trombes. For this reason, Karstedt thought they would be better served away from the fight,

guarding those from the temple.

However, they had harmed the one they were meant to protect and led to the growth of a second trombe in what could only be described as a disastrous failure. Because of this, they were both under house arrest in the knight barracks until their punishment was decided. Shikza, however, had contacted his family in hopes of a reduced sentence, and his mother was pleading for help from anyone with power who would listen.

“It seems she even wept in Lady Veronica’s presence, which is exactly why I imagined it would be better for me to return the tool in your place,” said Karstedt, while pointing at the box containing the magic tool Ferdinand had brought with him.

“Indeed, thank you. I would rather not see her if I can help it.”

The box, which could only be opened by the archduke or one with the archduke’s direct authorization, contained the magic tool that allowed one to peer into the memories of others. It had been lent to Ferdinand so he could see whether the commoner-turned-blue-robe who had displayed an enormous amount of mana at the Healing Ritual was a potential threat to Ehrenfest—or an opportunity.

The apprentice blue shrine maiden had hair like the night sky as if she had received the God of Darkness’s blessing from birth, and her pretty face was punctuated by two moon-like golden eyes. But what drew the most attention was her small body, so slight and underdeveloped that it was hard to believe she was old enough to have been baptized.

But in contrast to her childish appearance, she had exploded with so much mana that it boggled the mind. She had shown no hint of exhaustion after refilling the drained earth, and it was clear at a glance that she had many, many times more mana than Shikza, who possessed no more mana than a laynoble despite being a mednoble, and had only been permitted to leave the temple because the country was experiencing a dearth of mana.

That was not the amount of mana a normal apprentice shrine maiden would have. Just how much would she have upon growing older and coming of age?

Karstedt himself had never performed the ritual, nor had he even touched a divine instrument, so it was hard for him to judge how much mana the apprentice shrine maiden truly had. But it was abnormal enough that Ferdinand had immediately petitioned the archduke to determine if she was a threat, and the archduke in turn granted him permission to use the memory-searching tool.

“...So, how did it go?” asked Karstedt while taking the box.

In a rare display of transparency, Ferdinand made no effort to hide his grimace as he rubbed his temples. “She has not a trace of

malice or trickery within her. Her mind was full of nothing but books—exhaustingly so.”

So he said with a thoroughly annoyed expression, but Karstedt could sense that something was different about him. Ferdinand seemed vigorous and expressive, perhaps for the first time since the death of his father, where he had said, *“I have grown tired of resisting the pressure of those around me. I no longer care what happens in the world,”* before giving up on everything and entering the temple with a dead expression.

“In truth,” Ferdinand continued, “Myne is a child who has memories of living as a high-class noble in another world. Despite her age here, she has the memories of her past life as an adult.”

“Huh? Come again?”

Ferdinand’s report on Myne came so far out of left field that Karstedt doubted his ears. Without even thinking, he asked Ferdinand to repeat himself, and so he did. Karstedt wasn’t expecting there to be any mistake given that the tool was specifically intended to remove all doubts, but his report was still hard to believe.

“I, uh... I don’t know what to say. It’s absurd.” Karstedt managed to squeeze out a response, and Ferdinand nodded in agreement.

“Even I think it’s absurd, and I saw the world in her memories. I doubt many will believe it, but it’s the truth. Myne’s extraordinary behavior is the result of having lived in the lower city on top of retaining her memories of living in another world. However, she has no malice or ill intentions toward the city. If we can use her memories in service of Ehrenfest, she will be a tremendous boon to us. But as she is solely concerned with books, it will be necessary that those around her guide her into being useful.”

What interested Karstedt the most wasn’t the ridiculous tale of Myne having lived in another world, which he still couldn’t believe, but rather how talkative Ferdinand was being. Despite having synchronized minds with another to forcefully peer into their memories, he surprisingly didn’t seem all that displeased.

“You’ve taken quite a liking to her, I see.”

“Who are you talking about?”

“Who else but the apprentice blue shrine maiden named Myne?”

Karstedt knew full well the importance of an apprentice shrine maiden in the current day where there was a drastic shortage in mana and nobles, but Ferdinand was showing more care to this Myne than he would expect him to give to a lowborn girl. Ferdinand had allowed her to ride on his own highbeast, opted to bring not just one but two attendants, showed an extraordinary amount of overprotectiveness by assigning two guards to her while she waited for the ceremony to commence, and had even given her a ring and a potion of his own

creation.

But above all else, he had declared that she was under his custody in front of all the knights. Karstedt could remember how shocked he had been when that happened, having never expected Ferdinand to say something like that.

Karstedt's observation made Ferdinand grimace with clear displeasure. "I have not taken a liking to her or anything of the sort. She is just that valuable."

"Oh?"

As Ferdinand began discussing how much her abundance of mana and exceptional math skills were useful in the temple, on top of her frequent discoveries and inventions, Karstedt was struck with the urge to ask how that was different from him taking a liking to her. But he deliberately kept quiet. Ferdinand had a tendency to hide the things important to him or otherwise distance himself from them, and that tendency had only intensified since he joined the temple.

...Ferdinand, for all his obstinacy and stubborn tendencies, had finally found someone to like. There was no need to tease him for it and risk spoiling everything—that was the conclusion Karstedt had come to. Having known Ferdinand since he was young and thus knowing how prone he was to self-sabotage, Karstedt was aware there were many things he would have to be cautious about.

"She showed an enormous amount of mana to everyone," Karstedt began. "Rumors have spread like wildfire through the Noble's Quarter with the Knight's Order at the center of it all. Myne will be in even more danger now than she was before."

"Undoubtedly. Her mana was more extraordinary than I had anticipated. Although I declared that she was under my custody, I am ultimately no more than a mere priest. Nobles seeking mana will hunt her down, and one day she will be put in harm's way. It is impossible to say whether I will be able to stave off all of their advances." Ferdinand spoke blandly, his face as expressionless as ever. There were exceedingly few who could tell that he was in fact making the expression of one immensely frustrated with their own lack of power.

"What will you do, then?"

"I would ask you to adopt Myne," requested Ferdinand, which made Karstedt open his eyes wide with surprise. As the captain of the Knight's Order, Karstedt was an archnoble. By suggesting that he adopt Myne, Ferdinand was insinuating she had at least as much mana as an archnoble.

"The sooner she is taken in by a noble the better," Ferdinand continued. "She has far too much mana to be kept as a mere shrine maiden. That means she will need to learn to control her mana at the Royal Academy, but as a man of the temple, I will not be able to

support her ascension into the nobility. There are few I would trust to shield her from the dangers that await.”

Karstedt considered the proposition. Who could Ferdinand trust to treat Myne well despite her lowborn origins, and give her an upbringing suited to someone with her amount of mana? As far as he could tell, nobody but himself and his family.

“I intend to educate Myne such that she will not prove to be an embarrassment to your family. Furthermore, Myne has enough talent to financially support herself, and I will ensure that you are not burdened by adopting her.”

“It truly is rare for you to be so concerned with another,” mused Karstedt.

Ferdinand lowered his gaze. He sank deeper into his chair and fell silent, his long fingers laced around each other as he searched for what to say. Then, he slowly began to speak.

“As she is a commoner, it is impossible to say what might happen to her without a powerful ally supporting her. I would not like for anyone to go through what I have been through. That is all.”

That probably wasn’t all. But at the very least, Ferdinand was telling the truth, speaking from the heart with no intention to deceive. Karstedt, knowing Ferdinand’s painful past well, let out a sigh and looked out of the window.

“...I am willing to adopt her, but there are some who would find fault with you for requesting my help before anyone else’s, no?”

Ferdinand could guess who Karstedt was referring to. His expression darkened and he drummed his temple while saying “Must everyone be so difficult to deal with...?”

There were exceedingly few who could tell that his expression visibly darkening was actually a sign that he was fairly relaxed. Karstedt once again gave a wry smile at how tough Ferdinand was to understand.

Printing Guild

The High Priest used a magic tool to look into the memories I had of my past life. That really surprised me, but I understood his reasoning fairly well. There was no better way to prove to him that I was innocent and not a threat. And as it turned out, the magic tool proved to be beyond incredible. Using that tool, I could read any book I had read in the past simply by visiting the world of my mind.

I asked the High Priest to use the tool on me again, but he shot the idea down hard.

...I know he only looked into my memories to determine my worth and see whether I'm a threat, but still, what would be the harm in doing me a favor and playing around sometimes? High Priest, you big meanie.

I was complaining a bit, but in truth I really was grateful that the High Priest ultimately decided I wasn't a threat and that I could continue inventing new products under Benno's supervision. Thanks to that, I could keep living my life as usual without anything really changing.

...Not to mention, I learned a lot from all that.

I learned how well my old mom had cared for me, and how much my current family is caring for me now. I wanted to pay my family back in this life, to make up for how I hadn't managed to in my past. I wanted to value my time with them, rather than simply treating it as a normal and insignificant part of my everyday life.

"Myne, we started printing picture books yesterday, making them alongside the paper."

It was the day after my dream experience, and Lutz was telling me about how the Myne Workshop was holding up as we walked to the Gilberta Company for what felt like the first time in quite a while.

"So, Lutz. How many picture books do you think you can make? How much paper did you end up finishing?"

"I think eighty books is the best we can do, and that's if we also use the paper we're making now. We can make seventy-five books with what we have at the moment—seventy-six at best—but I know you said you wanted to make as many as possible at once."

"Uh huh, thanks. I know it's harder now that it's getting cold, but I'm counting on you."

According to Lutz, the second printing of the children's bible

would end up producing about eighty copies. They wouldn't take that long to finish, since the gray priests who had learned how printing worked last time would be handling it together. With that sorted, I just needed to think about selling the picture books.

I looked at my feet and muttered, "Maybe we should make a new guild for this."

"A new guild?"

"Uh huh. Like a Printing Guild, or a Publishing Guild... The books we're making in the Myne Workshop are unlike any of the books nobles have, right?"

The books that existed prior to our own were bundles of parchment, each individually written by hand. Colorful and detailed illustrations were added to the pages and the leather covers were studded with gold and jewels, making the books into works of art worth their extravagant cost.

"The books we're making can hardly be called art, yeah," noted Lutz. "They're picture books for kids, after all..."

"And the production process is entirely different. I only know this because the High Priest told me, but it turns out that other books aren't just made in a single workshop."

Up until now, every step in the process of creating a single book had required contributions from craftsmen of numerous different workshops—someone to write the text, someone to draw the art, someone to gather the paper and bind it into a book, someone to make the leather cover, someone to embed the gold and gems into that cover, and so on. Due to that, no single workshop dedicated to books existed in the world.

However, the books made by our own Myne Workshop used printing technology, and thus a single workshop could make multiple copies of the same book all at once. It would introduce an entirely new line of work. The bookmaking profession had been born overnight, so a guild was necessary to secure rights to the technology and profits, and to organize workshops to maintain a certain standard of quality.

"First I need to talk to Benno, but... Well."

If I started selling books, I would need to go through Lutz to sell them to the Gilberta Company. In which case, it was Benno who would need to add making a Printing Guild to his list of work. After all, it was hard to imagine him entrusting that kind of work to someone else. Maybe it would be the straw that breaks the camel's back.

"The Gilberta Company's a clothing store, right? Then there's the rinsham workshop, the Plant Paper Guild and its workshops, the Italian restaurant we're hoping will be done by spring..." I listed off

every job I knew Benno had, shocked by how I was involved in basically all of them. “There’s so much to do, and we’re adding the Printing Guild on top of all that. I’m scared Benno will get so busy he just collapses.”

If Benno died from overwork, would I be responsible? Lutz shook his head as I paled with worry.

“Master Benno’s busy ’cause he wants to be. It’s not anything you need to get anxious about. We only need to worry when Mark starts stepping in.”

Considering that Benno took on extra work out of choice while Mark simply followed from behind to make sure everything went well, I decided that I should worry about Mark dying from overwork first.

“Myne! What the hell did you do this time?!”

Benno’s lightning struck the second I stepped into his office. I hadn’t even mentioned the Printing Guild yet—in fact, I had come to talk to him about it before doing anything myself, so I had no idea why he was so mad. All I could do was shake my head, blinking in confusion and trembling with fear.

“Wh-What are you talking about?! I haven’t done anything yet!”

“I got an order from an archnoble—he’s telling me to make new ceremonial robes for you as soon as physically possible. Of course you did something! So spit it out! What happened?!”

I immediately understood what Benno was referring to and clapped my hands together. “Ooh, by an archnoble you mean Lord Karstedt, right? He’s the captain of the Knight’s Order, you know. I’m glad he kept his promise. I was kinda worried that he wouldn’t... What a relief.”

“Not for me! My heart almost stopped when an archnoble summoned me outta nowhere, idiot!” scolded Benno. “Tell me when stuff happens!”

After imagining myself in his place, the blood drained from my face. Being summoned by an archnoble you didn’t know out of nowhere would be nothing short of terrifying.

“I-I’m sorry! I was bedridden with a fever and forgot all about it.”

Not to mention that I had been told not to discuss matters of the Order with anyone, so I hadn’t even given details to Lutz or my attendants. The idea of reporting anything to Benno hadn’t even come to mind.

“Well, whatever. I nearly had a heart attack, but now I’ve got a connection to an archnoble. I’m gonna exploit this opportunity as much as I can. Anyway... Didn’t we just finish your ceremonial robes the other day? What happened to those?”

“I was told not to say anything since it involves the Knight’s

Order, but long story short, they got completely ruined.” With thoughts of the ripped-up robes in mind, I slumped my shoulders and made an “X” with my arms in front of my chest.

Benno scratched his head. “No helping that, then. I can guess this is one time I’ll be better off not knowing. But with that said, if you’re not here about the robes, what’ve you got for me?”

“We’ve started the second round of bible printing, and I thought it would be best to talk to you about how we’ll sell them. You made a Plant Paper Guild for the plant paper we made, so I was wondering if you might want to make a Printing Guild for the books.”

I explained why I thought a Printing Guild might be necessary while looking at my diptych, and Benno nodded while rubbing his chin.

“A Printing Guild, huh? That’ll be necessary sooner or later, and we don’t want anyone stealing away the rights to your inventions, so we might as well go ahead and make one now. Myne, how many books do you have right now that you can sell?”

“...I can use some of the ones we’re about to make as textbooks, so we can sell the twenty I made earlier if necessary.”

I ultimately hadn’t needed to sell any books when I was buying clothes. I had given away five as gifts and left another five in the dining hall, but the other twenty were still sitting stacked in the workshop.

“Lutz,” said Benno, “go get them from the workshop. We won’t get permission to make the Printing Guild without real-life examples.”

Lutz ran off to the temple, leaving me behind to answer any questions Benno needed to know for the guild-establishing paperwork. He seemed so busy scrawling on the wooden boards that I couldn’t help but watch with my brow furrowed, worried that I really was giving him too much work.

“...Benno, won’t making a Printing Guild on top of everything else be a little too much work for you?” I asked, worried. “Will you be okay?”

He glanced at me and gave a snort. “That’s nothing for you to worry about. And we may be making a guild here, but it isn’t gonna lead to many other printing workshops popping up.”

“Wha? Why not? I need more printing workshops to appear so they can fill the world with books.”

“First of all, the market’s too small; not many people buy books. Second of all, there’s still not many plant paper workshops out there. Nobody even knows how to make the printing ink you use either. Things just haven’t developed enough yet for more workshops to be possible. That’s why going ahead and making a guild now won’t lead to much extra work.”

Benno had been extremely busy when he made the Plant Paper Guild since he had to combat vested interests while also establishing workshops before anyone else could. But in the case of the Printing Guild, not much would happen since the components needed for printing hadn't been assembled or spread yet.

"I can't believe I worked so hard to make printing happen and it's not even leading to more books. I'm glad you won't be busy, Benno, but I'm not happy at all to hear the Printing Guild won't be flourishing."

"Whether the Printing Guild will end up busy or not depends on how much people like those books you're making," muttered Benno while scribbling away at the paperwork.

I began to muse on our customer base and the country's literacy rate. "I think that the children's bibles will be well-liked by nobles with young kids... particularly laynobles and mednobles, since they aren't that wealthy overall. For that reason, I'm planning to keep making picture books about gods and knights and so on for a while."

I had thought a lot while sick in bed. Particularly about the magic weapons the Knight's Order had used while fighting the trombe, divine blessings, and the Healing Ritual. The glowing batons they all had were likely catalysts for using magic, so using mana to change their shape was pretty easy. But when it came to blessings, rituals, and other large-scale uses of magic, it became essential to use the names of the gods. All the difficult prayers I had to memorize involved them, as did the one used by the knights to enchant their weapons with the God of Darkness's blessing. I had even given a blessing accidentally just by mentioning one god's name in my prayer.

Put simply, in noble society, it was absolutely vital to learn the names of the gods to perform any kind of significant magic.

"Nobles have to learn the names of the gods, no matter what. And large store owners with connections to nobles need to memorize the names of the gods too, right? I remember you said a god's name when greeting the High Priest, Benno. I think that we could sell our books to both nobles and rich store owners if we put emphasis on how productive they'll be for learning."

"...You've been learning more about nobles bit by bit over there. If that's what you think, I'd say you're probably right. But they just don't look good the way they are right now. You really should work on getting leather covers for them," said Benno.

But I shook my head. "No, they're fine as they are. I think it would be better for anyone who wants a leather cover to just order one themselves from a leather workshop that already makes book covers."

"Your reasoning?" Benno's gaze sharpened, his dark-red eyes

shining with curiosity.

I held up a finger, pointing it straight toward the ceiling. "First, to spread the workload. If you order the leather covers yourself through the Gilberta Company, you'll have to order them all from the same workshop. I don't think putting that much strain on a single workshop is good for quality or for timely deliveries. The principle of economic competition is really important here."

"Oh yeah, you hate exclusivity and all that."

Benno seemed to have interpreted from our discussions about the Italian restaurant that I hated having dedicated workshops. However, I didn't hate the idea itself.

"I actually think it's fine to have a preferred workshop you stick to, but not when it prevents you from ordering from another workshop even when you know your preferred workshop won't be able to handle all the work. Not to mention that I think letting one workshop monopolize work will lead to a lot of conflict." I pursed my lips, and Benno let out a snort.

"Next?"

"Second, to let customers tailor books to their own tastes," I continued, now with a second finger raised. "If they're going to be spending so much money on a book, they'll want it to be exactly how they like it, right? I think customers will end up more satisfied if we just let them order the kind of covers they want. That way they won't have to remove the ones we make to put their own covers on. The books made at our workshop are just bound with string, so it's easy to take them apart and customize them."

While I explained, I thought about our second batch of books. My intention had been to use the hide glue I had gone out of my way to make, but if we were making the books with the understanding they would be customized, it would probably be better to stick with binding that used only string.

"Third is time. It will take a lot more time to make books if each one needs a fancy leather cover. The Myne Workshop's key strength is that it can produce a big batch of identical books in a short period of time, which would be undermined by the time it takes to make leather covers. I would rather spend that time making other kinds of books."

I was more concerned with the quantity of books in the world than making sure each was a beautifully wrought work of art, so I would hate for each book to take a long time to make. That was purely a personal bias, but still. I wouldn't budge on it.

"Fourth is the price. If the books aren't cheap, our already small customer base won't grow, and the most important thing for us is getting the books sold in the first place. Not to mention, even poor nobles who just want the pride of owning books can make excuses

about the lack of a cover by saying their preferred workshop is busy, and I'm sure there are customers out there who are only concerned with the contents of the books, not their appearance."

Benno frowned as I finished listing off all the reasons why I didn't want to give the books leather covers.

"I get that you want to sell the books as cheap as possible to circulate them as much as you can. Too bad that's the exact opposite of what a merchant would do. I want to jack up the price as far as it'll go and get all the profit I can."

According to Benno, it was common practice to focus on visual aesthetics to boost the value of a product. The price would then be increased until customers could just barely afford it to make as much money as possible.

"...Will my way not work?"

"If you're only sticking to this town then probably not, but it's actually not too bad of an idea if you're thinking about selling them all over the country. You'd just need to focus on how they're different from existing books." Benno closed his eyes briefly, then looked at me with the opportunistic gaze of a merchant.

"I'm talking from my gut as a merchant here, but... I get the feeling that when it comes to books, I should let you do what you want wherever possible. I just wanted to hear your reasoning, since this is new territory for everyone," he said, thereby granting me permission to sell my thread-bound books as they were.

"Okay then, let's price them as low as we can while still breaking even."

"Nah, we're still gonna turn a profit here. Spread the books while still making money, idiot."

...Grr, it always comes down to profit with Benno.

Lutz returned with a bag full of books right as we were finishing the paperwork. I sold them to Benno, and just like that I had three large gold coins. On one hand I was sad that it would still be quite some time before books could be sold cheaply, but on the other I was relieved to have a decent amount of money again. I could use it to buy a little more food for myself and the orphanage before the snow started to fall.

"Myne, we're heading to the Merchant's Guild."

Benno had Lutz carry the books and picked me up as he always would when we headed to the Guild. The moment we set foot outside we were greeted by the sight of various carts passing by, loaded with crops. Farmers were selling their produce as the city began to prepare for winter, and since a lot of people were buying in bulk, the streets were far busier than usual. The air reeked with the stench of people

all over making fatty candles.

“Actually, Benno—do you think nobles would buy candles that don’t smell?”

I had heard that rich nobles used candles made from beeswax, but maybe nobles who wanted a cheaper alternative would be interested in regular candles that didn’t smell. I asked Benno his thoughts while thinking about the herb candles we had made at the orphanage, and his eyebrow shot up as he looked at me with disbelief.

“Candles that don’t smell, you say?”

“Oh, Myne, are you talking about the candles you salted out then mixed herbs into? I haven’t used any of them myself yet, but the candles themselves sure smell less than normal ones.”

“Lutz! You didn’t tell me about those!” yelled Benno, which made Lutz’s jade eyes widen.

“What...? I told you about them when I gave my report on the orphanage’s winter preparations. I think you probably ignored them since you were so focused on the hide glue.”

“Aaah... That’s possible.”

Hide glue was a lot more interesting to Benno than candles, so much so that it had dominated his attention. Hide glue did already exist in this world, but people usually only bought what they needed when they absolutely had to, and nobody made it themselves outside of workshops that needed glue for their products.

“In my neighborhood nobody salts out their candles because they’re poor, but I was wondering if rich people salted their candles out at all. Are the candles you use yellow, Benno? Or are they white?”

“They’re a light yellow, ’cause they’re half fat and half wax.”

“That means even rich people don’t salt them out, then.”

Benno had mentioned that he used money to take care of as much of his winter preparations as possible. If he wasn’t familiar with salted-out candles, it was safe to say nobody in the city was.

“I just buy my candles instead of making them, so you should probably sell that info to a candle workshop or a guild.”

“Okay, I’ll go to a candle workshop in the spring to sell the information, then have them help me make waxed stencil paper.”

As we continued talking about paper, we passed through the busy second floor of the Merchant’s Guild and ascended to the third. As Benno spoke to the receptionist there about registering the Printing Guild, Freida came out of a back room wearing her apprentice outfit, her pink twintails fluttering as she gave a small smile. Perhaps due to her having grown since I last saw her in the summer, she looked a lot more like an adult than I remembered.

“Ahah! It’s good to see you, Myne.”

“Long time no see, Freida. How are the pound cakes selling?”

The last time I had seen Freida was during the pound cake taste-testing event in the summer. It had been a huge success, with both the name “pound cake” and its various flavors spreading through the upper class like wildfire, shooting up Freida and Leise’s reputation in the process.

“They are selling magnificently—even the nobles love them. Many are even asking if I have any other sweets up my sleeve. Myne, would you like to answer their calls? I will buy the recipes at a fair market price,” said Freida with a smile.

I looked up at Benno. The moment we made eye contact, he gave me a solemn stare that I immediately understood as a firm “no.” Though, to be honest, I probably would have sold her a few recipes on the spot had I still been broke. Having financial leeway is very important.

“I think Benno might kill me if I do that, and I have enough money right now, so maybe next time.”

She must have expected that Benno wouldn’t give his permission, as she simply put a hand on her cheek and said “Oh well” without really looking that disappointed.

“...I grew quite worried when I heard you had entered the temple, but I can see that you are doing well. Has your Devouring heat calmed down? Have you found a noble to sign on with?”

“Thanks for thinking about me. My Devouring is fine now, but I’m definitely not going to sign on with a noble either way. I would rather be with my family.”

“Oh, really? Surely there have been many petitioning for you,” said Freida, her head tilted in confusion.

I was likewise confused; not a single noble had petitioned for me or anything of the sort. “Nobody’s petitioned for me, and I don’t intend to sign on with anyone anyway. Because I mean, I’m going to get a little baby sibling in the spring. How could I sign on with a noble when I’m going to be an elder sister?” If I signed now, I wouldn’t even get to see the baby’s face. That would just be too much.

“My my, congratulations. Tell your mother she has my well wishes. Incidentally, do come over to visit when you have the time. Leise is waiting for you.”

“...Mm, I think I’ll be busy for a while. There’s just so much I need to do.”

I had been extremely busy ever since I started going to and from the temple. Excluding days I had off due to being sick, I was so busy that there simply weren’t any days where I could just relax around the house.

“Does this new guild you’re making have something to do with why you’re so busy, Myne?”

“Uh huh. It’s what I want to do most, so...”

We were using thick paper as stencils now, but I wanted to move on to proper mimeograph printing. And if possible I wanted to dabble in movable type printing as well. I still had a lot of work to do on improving the paper, not to mention the ink. My mind was fixated on books, and even though I was busy, I was having a ton of fun.

“It’s what you want to do most...? Does it involve books, then?”

“Yep! I finished my first book. I’m going to make and sell a lot of them now. You should buy some too, Freida.”

“I’m afraid I can’t promise anything without seeing one first,” replied Freida with a slight smile and a shake of her head.

Not even our friendship was enough for her to buy a book on word of mouth alone. Just what I would expect from an apprentice merchant who put even Benno on guard.

I took a children’s bible from the bunch Lutz had brought and held it out to Freida. She had the business acumen of a rich girl raised to be a merchant, and I wanted to use this opportunity to hear what she thought about them.

“Here, one of the books. What do you think?”

Benno must have been just as interested in her opinion as I was, as he stopped writing on a form and shifted his gaze toward Freida. She looked at the book with narrowing eyes, appraising it from a merchant’s perspective.

“...This certainly is a book,” Freida observed while flipping through the pages. “But only the inside of one, it seems?”

I had put flowers into the cover pages, but it seemed that as far as people used to books were concerned, a paper cover was as good as no cover at all.

“That flowery page is the cover page. The plan is for customers to order the kind of covers they want from their preferred workshops. Those without a preferred workshop can ask the Gilberta Company for an introduction.”

“It’s nice that one does not have to rely on the Gilberta Company’s preferred workshop,” noted Freida while glancing at Benno. “How much does this book cost, then?”

I looked at Benno to answer for me. I didn’t know how much of a profit he intended to make from the books.

“One small gold and eight large silvers. Interested?”

“Yes, of course.”

Freida immediately tapped cards with Benno to purchase the children’s bible. I was impressed that she was willing to buy the book on the spot, but even more so that Benno was aiming to make three large silvers off each individual book. Maybe I should have increased the price to get a little bit more money for myself, too.

As I slumped in disappointment, upset at myself for not being a good enough merchant, Freida shut the picture book and smiled.

“Myne, I would recommend that your next picture book be about the gods of each season. I am having quite a rough time memorizing the gods subordinate to the Eternal Five.”

The picture book I had made discussed the king and queen gods, plus the five central gods that formed the seasonal cycle. The multiple subordinate gods beneath each of the Eternal Five hadn’t shown up at all. By letting me know what she wanted from books, Freida was telling me what all children of nobles and rich people would probably want to know. Requests like that made it easy to decide what book to make next.

“Thanks for the idea, Freida. My next picture book will be about the subordinate gods.” I noted that down on my diptych, which made Freida widen her eyes a bit. She peered over, with her eyes soon locking on the stylus.

“Myne, what is that? Does Benno have the rights to it already?”

“...You sure have a nose for profit, little girl.” Benno let out a sigh of rugged admiration as he looked down at Freida, who in turn exhaled in disappointment.

“My greatest regret is that you found Myne before I did, Benno. A sharp nose means nothing when the treat is out of reach.”

Johann's Task

Benno finished the paperwork while I chatted with Freida. It would take several days for the registration to be processed, which meant our business in the Merchant's Guild was done.

"Bye bye, Freida."

I waved goodbye to Freida and walked to the stairs myself, but the second floor had so many people that I needed Benno to carry me to avoid being crushed. The moment Benno took his first step onto the floor to begin pushing through, a loud shout echoed over the murmuring of the crowd.

"Wait! Please, wait! Gilberta Company girl!" shouted the person. Benno and I looked at each other.

"...Looks like Corinna has some crazy fans."

"Idiot. You're in my arms, he's definitely talking to you. Ignoring things you don't like won't change reality."

But I mean... I don't want to talk to anyone shouting in a place with this many people. Especially if he's calling me the "Gilberta Company girl" when I'm not even Benno's daughter.

"I don't exactly like how everyone's staring at us, so let's go outside. He'll follow us if it's really that important," I said, hurrying Benno on as we exited the Guild.

As expected, the person followed us. Benno stopped in the central plaza outside the Guild and set me down. I turned around to see a younger guy with bright orange hair tied behind his head burst out of the Guild and start running this way.

...Oh, that's Johann.

As I pondered the fact that I had always been wearing my Gilberta Company apprentice clothes when ordering things from Johann, he finally reached us.

"What's your business?" asked Benno from behind me. Johann, who was now gasping for air, knelt down in front of me and the fountain amid the large crowd of passersby going through the central plaza.

"Please become my patron!"

...Come again?!

I could feel the crowd staring daggers into us. I could even hear some of them whispering about what was happening, which made me feel unbearably awkward.

“Um, Johann, there are a lot of people here, so maybe we should go to your workshop?”

“No,” answered Benno. “If you’ve got something to talk about, you can discuss it in my store.”

Benno rejected the idea of us going to Johann’s store, instead saying we should talk at his. I had thought it would be best to avoid going there since Johann was mistaking me for Benno’s daughter, but he wasn’t letting that fly.

“It’ll be better for you and me both if I know what you’re about to jump into next. Talk with me and Lutz there.”

“Okay. In that case, Johann, would you come to the Gilberta Company with me?” I asked, and Johann stood up, a sparkle in his eyes.

“Yeah, of course. What father wouldn’t be worried about sending his daughter to a workshop alone?”

“He’s not my father!”

“She’s not my daughter!”

Benno and I shouted at the exact same time. As Johann’s mouth dropped and his eyes widened, I took a firm step forward and looked up at him.

“I’m Myne. Benno helps me out a lot, but he’s not my dad, and I’m not even an apprentice at the Gilberta Company.”

“Wha? But you wear their apprentice clothes, and you have a guild card...” Murmuring in disbelief, Johann paled and began to list out all the reasons he thought we were related.

“Myne’s the forewoman of her own workshop and I’m her financial guardian. Given your age I’m guessing you want to talk about your test? Fair enough then, follow me.” Benno spoke with a resigned sigh, then hefted me up and started walking. That was exactly the kind of thing that made people think we were related, but he hated my slow walking speed too much to stop. He walked entirely at his own pace, forcing Johann to power walk to keep up and Lutz to break into a jog.

“Hey, are those two really not related?” Johann quietly asked Lutz, refusing to give up on the matter.

“They’re not. Master Benno’s a bachelor,” replied Lutz with exasperation.

Benno heard their whispered conversation and glared at Johann, who jerked in fear and straightened up. I saw it all since I was looking over Benno’s shoulder.

When we entered Benno’s office, Lutz followed Mark upstairs to go make tea. Johann, as a simple craftsman in a smithy, had probably never been taken to the office of a big store owner before. He looked

around timidly while sitting in the chair offered to him. It was hard to think he was the same person who had boldly shouted “*Please become my patron!*” in the middle of a busy plaza.

“Benno, what was that test you were talking about?” I asked while leaning over the table, having climbed onto my chair.

Benno’s eyes moved to Johann. “It’s your business, Johann. You explain.”

Johann jerked and straightened his back once again as he was met by Benno’s glare. He looked between me and Benno several times while searching for words. Eventually, he took a deep breath and began.

“...When a leherl in the Smithing Guild comes of age, they have to pass a test to be recognized as an adult.”

Johann must not have been much of a skilled speaker, as he spoke in a quiet, deliberate tone while searching for words. The test was to get one of the customers who recognized your skill to fund your efforts as a patron; the patron would give the leherl a task which would have to be completed within a year. Some patrons would ask for weapons and others for everyday items.

More important than the task itself, however, was the patron they found. Their satisfaction with the completed product was of course important, but what really mattered was securing continued support for the workshop in the future. If a smith failed the test, their leherl contract would be made null and void, forcing them down to the position of a lehang.

“But you’re pretty good, Johann. Won’t it be easy for you to find a patron?” I asked curiously.

Johann lowered his eyes before slowly shaking his head. “I... I always get so finicky about details that customers don’t like me too much.”

Johann wanted precise details about his orders and would repeatedly ask questions to find those details out, which made customers conclude that he was so unskilled he couldn’t make anything without tedious handholding. In some ways, it wasn’t wrong to conclude that one mark of a skilled craftsman was the ability to make what a customer wanted based on rough instructions alone, but Johann had the skill to make precise instructions a reality, and had more or less been doing all the precise orders his workshop received by himself.

Naturally, the foreman of Johann’s workshop didn’t want to let him go, but there was nothing he could do if Johann didn’t pass the Smithing Guild’s test.

“I’m the only leherl in the whole Guild without a patron... And I’m coming of age at the end of autumn, so I’m really at the end of my

rope here.”

There was a baptism ceremony at the beginning of each season, and a coming of age ceremony at the end of each season. Given how late into autumn we were, Johann really didn't have much time left to find a patron.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Master Benno.”

Lutz and Mark climbed down the stairs holding tea. Mark distributed the cups before leaving and Lutz moved behind Benno, who took a sip of tea before glancing at Johann.

“Myne may be a forewoman, but she's still a kid. I'm sure your boss wasn't a fan of that,” Benno said, making Johann shrink down a bit.

“He wasn't, but she's our only customer who brings detailed blueprints for me...”

It seemed that most people were opposed to someone underage like me being a patron, reason being there weren't many kids with a lot of their own money to use. But I had a guild card, I respected Johann's talent, and I had a history of making big orders. On top of that, I happily answered Johann's detailed questions, praised his work, and asked specifically for him.

It seemed that by requesting his work multiple times, I had become qualified to become his patron. But as I was underage, I would need the consent of a parent or guardian.

“You're the only one who could be my patron now. My foreman kicked me out of the workshop and told me it'd be a long shot, but I had to try.”

It seemed he had assumed the daughter of a big store would be willing to become a patron for show while actually using her father's money. On top of that, Johann would get the prestige of securing the Gilberta Company as a patron.

“Turns out you aren't actually related, though...” Johann slumped his shoulders.

Due to Benno carrying me around in workshops and the Merchant's Guild, on top of me making expensive orders while wearing Gilberta Company apprentice clothes, it seemed everyone had thought for sure that I was his daughter. Which reminded me that Otto had mentioned that we looked like father and daughter to everyone around us. Given the age gap, I could hardly blame them.

But to Benno the bachelor, that was nothing but frustrating. He glared at me with harsh eyes.

“Of course Myne's not my daughter. I wouldn't raise an idiot with no common sense like her. My daughter'd have at least as much sense as Corinna does,” said Benno, who had raised his little sister himself after his parents died when they were young.

I pursed my lips into a sharp pout and glared at him as hard as I could. But sadly, Benno was ultimately more annoyed with being treated like my dad than I was for being treated as his daughter.

“Guess that means you can’t be my patron, then...” Johann, picking up on the tense atmosphere, started to stand up with a defeated expression.

But I grabbed onto his sleeve. I had something I wanted him to do regardless of all this guild test business. Him needing a patron was just an added convenience.

“Benno, Benno. Eheheh. There’s something I want Johann to make.” I smiled at Benno while still holding Johann’s sleeve, and he rubbed his temples while letting out a sigh that told me he had already seen this coming.

“Alright. I’ll give you my permission as your guardian and be the cosigner.” Benno granted his permission while waving a hand dismissively. The one most surprised to see him grant permission so casually was actually Johann.

“Um, if the patron runs out of money, the cosigner will have to...”

“You think a merchant doesn’t know what being a cosigner means? Don’t sweat it. I don’t need to worry about Myne running out of money. Cosigning for her hardly matters,” said Benno with a shrug. He knew that even if I did run out of money, I could get it all back by selling the books we were printing now, and my info about the candles would help to further smooth things out.

“You just got your hands on a patron that won’t run out of money, y’know.”

Every craftsman wanted a rich patron more than they could say. Benno’s words made Johann light up with glee.

“That’s amazing! You’re really gonna be my patron, Myne? Uh, I mean... Miss Myne?” Johann faltered as he mused over what to call me, earning him a light smack from Benno.

“Hey, don’t you know you gotta respect your patrons? I know she’s just a little girl in looks and age, but she’s paying to keep you alive. Call her Lady Myne if you know what’s good for you.”

“Sorry. Lady Myne, then,” Johann hurriedly corrected himself.

I smiled and waved my hand to say he didn’t have to worry about it—far be it from me to care what people called me. Titles weren’t important to me, but the task I was about to give him was.

“Okay, Johann. I reckon I’ll have the catalog and detailed blueprints of what I want you to make at your workshop by tomorrow.”

If I put my all into it, I could probably even iron out the production process and the finer details on the blueprints by the end of today. I clenched my fists with determination as Johann blinked in

surprise.

“Huh? Catalog? Like, multiple things? B-But the test is only supposed to be making a single thing.”

“Well, it is one thing. The metal letter types all belong to one set.”

The thirty-five letter alphabet in this world had uppercase and lowercase letters just like English did, but were otherwise similar to Japanese’s hiragana and katakana. Naturally, I would need letter types for both the uppercase and lowercase letters—after all, the terms “uppercase” and “lowercase” were historically derived from where the cases containing these letter types were organized in print shops. Fifty of each vowel sound and twenty of each consonant should be enough.

“If I’m going to be your patron, I want you to make metal letter types. I imagine it’ll be a pretty arduous task since each one is uniquely detailed and there’s so many, but well, that’s how it is. Do you regret choosing me as your patron?”

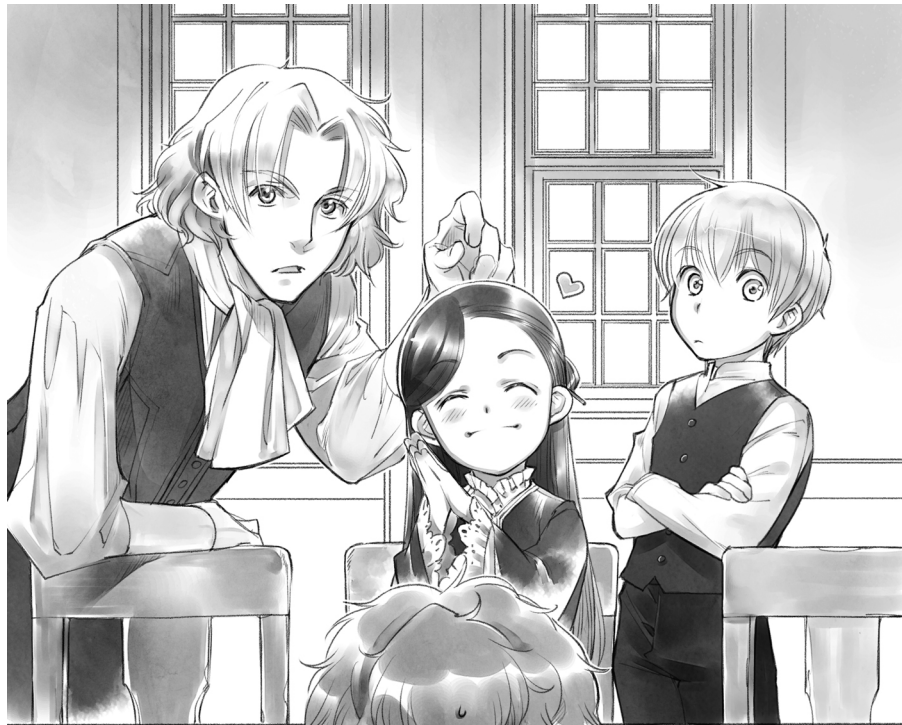
I gave a brief explanation of what letter types were, which made Johann blink in wide-eyed surprise. He looked to Benno and Lutz for help, and the two then looked at each other before exchanging light nods.

“Listen to what people say more. I told you she’d be a good patron ’cause she won’t run out of money, yeah? You should’ve thought about why I didn’t say anything else,” said Benno.

“If you don’t think you can keep up with Myne’s craziness, you should give up now and go find someone else. She’s always like this,” Lutz added.

It was hard to say whether they were giving him warnings or words of support. Either way, Johann clenched his fists on his lap and shut his eyes tight. After a moment of deep thought he looked at me, eyes filled with determination.

“...I’ll do it. Please become my patron.”



I kicked things into high gear and finished the blueprints and detailed instructions before the day was over. I then brought them to Johann's workshop the next morning. Judging by how surprised he appeared when I arrived, he must not have actually expected me to complete the blueprints so quickly, but they got him so pumped up that I was sure he would be fine.

"Looks like we're one step closer to movable type printing, Lutz."

"...You sure look like you're having fun, Myne."

"If we can get over this challenge, movable type printing will be right around the corner. Once Johann has finished the letter types, I'll modify a press to make a real printer. That'll be in the spring, though. I need to spend the winter making a lot of money."

The Ink Guild and the Beginning of Winter

As autumn came to a close, we finished printing our second batch of children's bibles. I put aside the twenty we were going to use as textbooks and sold the other forty to Benno, earning six large golds. After months of scraping by the poverty line, I was suddenly rich.

Not long after, Fran and Rosina came to my place to talk to my family about my health over the upcoming winter, and in the following days I used the money earned from the picture books to fill out my winter preparations even more. And with that, I, my family, and the orphanage had all finished our respective winter preparations, just as the weather got cold enough that it seemed it might snow at any moment.

Lutz gave me a report as we made our way home from the temple.

"Myne, Master Benno said the head of the Ink Guild and the foreman of the ink workshop came to see him this morning."

"...I guess they noticed the new ink we're using?"

As predicted, rich people with connections to nobles were beginning to buy the children's bibles from the Gilberta Company. You could tell from a single glance that the ink used wasn't normal ink; there was a big difference between blue-tinged gallnut ink and the solid black paint ink made from soot and oil.

Naturally, the Ink Guild noticed this right away and started searching for who had made it, but nobody in the guild knew anything. Nobody except the foreman of the ink workshop that I had visited, that is.

"They said that a kid from the Gilberta Company knew how to make a different kind of ink."

That revelation sent the head of the Ink Guild and the foreman in question straight to the Gilberta Company—specifically to ask Benno whether he intended to make another Ink Guild for his new ink.

The Gilberta Company had a precedent for making new guilds. They had fought against the Parchment Guild to make the Plant Paper Guild and its accompanying workshops, which were now filling the market with plant paper somewhat cheaper than parchment. Although there was an agreement that parchment would still be used for official contracts, plant paper was vastly outselling it thanks to the fact that it could be mass produced; it only made sense that those with a vested

interest in ink would be on guard after Benno started using different ink on that plant paper to sell books.

“Master Benno wants you to come to the store tomorrow. He’s got something to talk to you about.”

“Okay.”

That was a standard affair for me, and the next day Lutz and I went to the Gilberta Company first before going to the temple.

“Morning, Benno.”

“There you are, Myne. Glad you came.”

Benno gestured at me to sit at the table while Lutz climbed up the back stairs. As a *leherl*, Lutz was practicing how to make and serve tea to visitors.

I sat down after seeing Lutz off, at which point Benno set his pen down and headed to the table. He sat down in front of me and began immediately.

“As I expected, the Ink Guild came knocking. You said you wanted to teach them how to make the ink and then let them make it all, yeah?”

“Yes. If you keep expanding your business into so many different fields you’ll just end up with more enemies, and making ink really has nothing to do with the Gilberta Company’s main line of work anyway. As long as they let the Myne Workshop keep making its own ink, I won’t mind selling the production process and letting them take care of the rest.”

The mass production of ink would be important for spreading print around the world, but trying to manage both processes by ourselves might end up being too much to handle. It made more sense to me to let other people take over these jobs where possible.

“How much money are you thinking?”

“Mmm, about as much as I’m giving to the temple, so... How about ten percent of the profits?”

My suggestion made Benno shake his head with a grimace. “You’re pricing it too low.”

“But the profits will go way up as the ink spreads, and I want them to sell the ink for cheap just like plant paper is being sold for cheap.”

My thought process was founded entirely on spreading the product as far as possible, but Benno dismissed the idea with a wave of his hand.

“At least raise it to thirty percent for the first ten years. Then you can bump it down to twenty percent for the ten years after that, then ten percent for the rest of time. That’s about fair for what you’re bringing to the table. You shouldn’t sell new technology so short.”

“Okay. I’ll leave the percentages to you.”

Benno was no doubt going with thirty percent instead of something much higher to accommodate me. I knew he had my best interests in mind, so I felt comfortable leaving all that to him.

“Here’s the tea.” Lutz came down the stairs, looking tense as he set cups down in front of us.

Benno picked up his cup, examining its contents with a sharp look in his eyes before taking a sip.

“...Not quite there yet.”

“It definitely isn’t great, but he’s getting better. Lutz, do you want Fran to help you a little? He’s a good teacher; both Gil and Delia are way better at making tea now.”

“That sounds good... Haaah.”

Lutz was working hard under Mark’s supervision, but his tea just wasn’t good enough to serve to any other visitors yet. For now he was practicing on me.

“That just leaves the contract magic.”

“You think we should use it?”

Contract magic was expensive enough that it was generally only used when nobles were involved. Benno had signed magic contracts with me twice before, but both times he was thinking long-term and laying the groundwork to protect me from nobles. But this time we were just dealing with the Ink Guild, which as far as I knew didn’t have any nobles in it.

“The deal we’re making will last a long time and involve a lot of money. It’s worth it, and personally, I don’t trust the Ink Guild’s head at all. Might as well play it safe with contract magic—this’ll be a contract with the Ink Guild itself, not him.”

“A contract with the Ink Guild?”

It seemed that groups were seen as separate legal entities in this world as well. I tilted my head in thought and Benno gave a slow nod.

“Yup. It’ll be important in ensuring that the contract remains in effect even when the head eventually changes.”

It seemed there were many historical cases where people assuming positions of power decided not to honor contracts that their predecessor had signed. It had happened enough times for the judiciary system here to develop the concept of a legal person.

“We’ll sell the ink production process to the guild. They’ll let the Myne Workshop keep making its own ink. We’ll make them price the ink cheap so it’ll spread along with the plant paper. We get thirty percent of their profits from the ink. That amount will change every ten years. Sound good?”

“Be sure to tell them that the ink isn’t good for using on parchment since it doesn’t soak in very much.”

After confirming the details with Benno and Lutz, Mark knocked

and stepped inside.

“Master Benno, two visitors from the Ink Guild are here.”

“Let them in once I ring the bell.”

“As you wish.” Mark left the room.

Benno immediately stood up and set me down on the floor from my chair with a grim expression. He then jutted his chin toward Lutz, who responded with a silent nod before opening the inner door to the stairs.

“Myne, I’ll negotiate with the Ink Guild. You don’t want to let them see you. Stay with Corinna, and I’ll send the magic contract up for you to sign once it’s all written down.”

“...Why jump through so many hoops to hide me?”

I thought it would be pretty weird to sign a contract with one party absent. I blinked in surprise, and after glaring at where the visitors were probably waiting in the other room, Benno explained in a low, dark voice.

“The foreman of the workshop might be alright, but the head of the guild has connections to merchant nobles and I don’t hear a lot of good things about him. There are a lot of bad rumors. You’ll be better off not letting him see you.”

“Okay. I’ll trust you on this.”

I was really curious about this man from the Ink Guild, but I went ahead and climbed the stairs to Corinna’s room with Lutz. Once there he immediately turned to head back downstairs, since it was his job to deliver the magic contract paper.

“Lutz, tell me what the head of the Ink Guild is like later, okay?”

“Yeah, sure.”

After seeing Lutz off, I turned to Corinna. “Sorry about this, Corinna. I just barged in out of nowhere.”

“It’s fine, Myne. Let’s use this opportunity to do the temporary stitching for your robes.”

“Okay. Sorry for giving you such a big job that needs to be done so quickly.”

Corinna guided me to the parlor with a gentle expression. Along the way we saw Otto in the hall, who met us with a friendly wave. He must have been off work today just like Dad was.

“Sheesh, Myne. I can’t believe you’d make Corinna do hard work for an archnoble when she’s this pregnant.”

“Otto, how many times have I told you not to poke your nose into my work?”

“I’m just worried about you, Corinna.”

Otto didn’t back down even after getting a hard glare from Corinna. They were as lovey-dovey as ever.

I watched Corinna kick Otto out of the room like she might a

petulant child, wondering whether her regular headaches were actually being caused by Otto rather than her pregnancy.

“I’m worried about you too, Corinna. Has Otto been going overboard lately? He and Dad are famous at the gate for being love crazy. Is he so excited for his first baby that he’s causing problems...?”

“My my, is that what people say about him? I imagine your mother has it just as rough as I do then.” Corinna laughed and brought over some blue fabric, which she began spreading on top of a large table.

“Do you think you’ll be able to finish the ceremonial robes? You really haven’t been given enough time.”

“It will certainly be a struggle; the workshop is very busy. But it’s still rare for us to get work from archnobles, so our seamstresses are giving it their all. We charged them quite a lot, after all.”

It seemed that when dyeing the cloth for my first set of robes, they had also dyed extra cloth of the same color to use on another order made by someone else. They were using that extra cloth now, and apparently everyone in the workshop was working at full speed on the embroidery.

“We still need to do the first fitting for that other order, which gives us plenty of time to dye new cloth before the deadline. But we were told to finish these robes as soon as possible, and while we don’t have the time to use different cloth for your first fitting, I can’t imagine you’ve grown enough for the measurements to be too different from last time.”

As she spoke, Corinna placed the blue cloth on me with fastening needles stuck through it. It was hard for her to do with her big belly, and it looked like everything she did was a struggle for her.

“I’m sorry, Myne. I’ll have to call a maid to help. This is a little too much for me to do on my own.”

“Your belly really is big now. Is it almost time?”

“Yes, I’ve been told to expect it around the middle of winter. The baby is quite energetic—it’s always kicking around in there. Perhaps it’s a boy?” Corinna rubbed her big belly while ringing a bell to summon a maid.

But it was Otto who came inside, saying “You rang?” and looking eager to help. I couldn’t help but laugh at Corinna’s exasperated expression.

“Y’know, now that Myne’s stolen Benno away from us, I think it’s about time I give up and accept my new life working in the Gilberta Company.”

“Um, Otto. What do you mean I’ve stolen Benno away from you?”

I don’t even have the arm strength to pick Benno up, let alone take him anywhere.

“It means what it means. As your financial guardian, Benno’s planning to keep on expanding his business. Which is why he’s in the middle of beating how the Gilberta Company works into my head,” Otto said with a small shrug as he started to help Corinna. He was actually doing a pretty good job—a sign that he had been working hard to learn.

“Otto, you look so in your element here that I almost forgot you’re a soldier. At this rate it might not be long before you open up your own store with Corinna, huh?”

“...Well, it’ll be a few years at the very least. I’ll be working hard for Corinna and our baby’s sake.”

“Yes yes, dear. Work your hands, not your mouth.”

Corinna finished the temporary stitching while giving instructions to Otto. The length was fine, so we decided to go with the same measurements as last time. She then chased Otto out again and fixed up my hair, which had gotten disheveled from the temporary stitching.

As I was putting my upper layer of clothes back on, a knock rang out from further in the house, followed by Mark announcing himself. We could hear the footsteps of someone walking to let Mark in; I hurriedly finished dressing myself and nodded right as Mark knocked on the parlor door.

“Please, come in.”

“Excuse me, Corinna.” Mark came inside with a sheet of contract paper and Lutz followed behind with a jar of ink. He spread the magic contract out on the round table and confirmed each point with me. It was pretty much exactly what I had discussed with Benno, and the numbers being in our favor showed that Benno had won the negotiations.

There was just one point I didn’t recognize. A line stating: “The contents of this contract will be recorded in the Ink Guild regulations.”

“Mark, what does this part about the Ink Guild regulations mean?”

“Guild regulations must be upheld by all the workshops belonging to a guild. In short, the contents of the contract being recorded in the Ink Guild’s regulations mean that they will apply to the Ink Guilds and ink workshops of other cities as well.”

The magic contract itself was only magically binding in Ehrenfest, but the guild regulations were upheld across all cities. As such, while there were a number of different Ink Guilds, they all followed the same regulations—though there were slight variations in rules depending on the city and the workshop in question. The way I saw it, guild regulations were pretty much like federal law that existed on top

of regional laws.

“But how will the Ink Guilds of other cities know to apply these rules? Is there some line of communication between them?”

“They are buying the production process for this ink precisely because it will be profitable to them. It is only natural that this Ink Guild would send word to their fellow Ink Guilds in neighboring cities. They will amend their copy of the regulations after learning the production process.”

I nodded at Mark’s explanation and grabbed the ink. The contract already had Benno’s and the Ink Guild’s names written on it, but not the name of the head of the guild himself. I wrote my name as close to the bottom as possible.

“So, Lutz. What kind of person was the head of the Ink Guild?”

“...He had a nasty look in his eyes. He was searching for you.”

“Bwuh?”

Lutz clenched his fists and explained, speaking quietly. “He told Master Benno that he knew a kid had brought up the new ink in the workshop. He said ‘Let me see her if she’s here.’ I think Master Benno was right to hide you... He felt a lot worse than the guildmaster.”

If Lutz was saying this man was a lot worse than the guildmaster, he must have been really bad. Lutz and Benno both being on guard around him was a sign that I should be on my guard too.

“But anyway, Myne. Hold out your hand,” said Lutz, readying his knife.

I winced, remembering that contract magic needed blood, and then held out my hand. A sharp, sudden pain shot through my fingertip and blood puckered out. I pressed it against the contract which then burst into a golden flame, burning the paper away and sealing the agreement. It looked as magical as ever.

“Myne,” said Mark, “please wait here quietly until Master Benno calls for you.”

“I know, Mark.”

With the contract signed, I passed the time by talking to Corinna about her baby and ignoring Otto’s weeping about how I wouldn’t be able to help him with work over the winter.

It was about lunchtime when Benno rushed up the stairs with a furious look in his eyes.

“Myne, I sent Mark to take Lutz home and call for your dad and sister to come get you. Don’t even think about leaving until they’re here!”

“...What?! Did something happen?!” I stood up and raced to Benno, who looked out the window with his brow deeply furrowed.

“I sent Lutz out on an errand to the Merchant’s Guild, and on the way there some men ganged up on him. They started asking questions

about ‘the Gilberta Company girl.’ Said he must know about you since he’s a leherl and brought the contract up.”

“That must mean they’re...” I trailed off, and Benno gave a deliberate nod.

“They must have been from the Ink Guild, but I can’t figure out why they’d start hunting for info *after* signing the contract.”

It made sense for them to want to gather information beforehand to help get better terms for themselves or something along those lines, but the contract was already signed. They had cornered Lutz even though that would obviously put us on guard, and we had no idea why. And there was no greater fear than the fear of the unknown.

“...There might be something going on behind the scenes here. Keep your eyes and ears wide open out there.”

“Right.”

“Myne, we’re here.”

“Dad! Tuuli!”

They had both just come off work, and judging by how heavy their breathing was, must have rushed over here at full speed.

“My apologies for calling you over,” said Benno to Dad, standing up from his seat.

“Nah, I appreciate you going out of your way to protect my daughter. Mind if I ask what the heck is going on?”

“The Ink Guild has definitely got their eyes on her, but I don’t know who’s pulling the strings,” explained Benno. “The fact that they’re hunting for information after the contract was signed is strange, and them going after Lutz just doesn’t make sense.”

I could see my dad’s eyes harden. Tuuli, looking nervous, gave me a tight hug.

“I’m thinking Myne will be safest if you send her to the temple now,” Benno continued. “I’ll leave the decision up to you and your wife, but they won’t be able to do anything to her if she’s in the temple. It’ll also buy us time to dig for information ourselves.”

“...Right.”

Dad gave a grave nod, then picked me up with his brow furrowed deeply. “What do you think, Myne? You want to go to the temple? Or do you want to go home?”

In all honesty, I wanted Dad to take me home so I wouldn’t be lonely. But that would make it more likely that these people would go after Lutz and my family.

“...I don’t want to leave so soon, but I don’t want anything to happen to you or Lutz even more. I’ll go to the temple. The snow’s going to start soon, anyway.”

I put on a brave face, but the idea of living in the temple made me

unspeakably nervous. I squeezed Dad's shirt hard.
And so my winter in the temple began.

Winter Hibernation and Handiwork

Dad and Tuuli took me to my chambers in the temple, where Fran greeted us with wide eyes. He looked between me and them, blinking rapidly.

“Did something happen, Sister Myne?”

“Sorry to barge in like this, Fran.”

He started to usher me in, but I stopped him and said that I didn’t want Delia to hear before beginning to explain the situation in the doorway. I explained that the head of the Ink Guild was targeting me, that Lutz was accosted by a group of men, and that I would start living in the temple a bit sooner than planned for safety’s sake.

I also mentioned that while we didn’t know what the head of the Ink Guild was after (nor did I know his name), we did know that he had connections to nobles and had a lot of bad rumors surrounding him, which meant we should avoid mentioning this to Delia.

Fran listened to everything with a frown, then gave a deliberate nod. “Understood. I would ask you to tell the High Priest what you told me.”

“Fran,” began Dad, squeezing his hand on my shoulder, “we’re gonna try to find out what’s going on here ourselves. For now, I’m leaving Myne to you. But I’ll be coming back to check up on her.”

Fran nodded, looking right back at him. “You may count on me. Your visits will no doubt be the warmth that gets Sister Myne through the winter.”

“Myne, don’t be too much of a handful for them. And be sure to tell the High Priest everything. Nothing good comes from a lack of communication with your boss.”

Dad gave some very soldier-like advice, which I responded to with a smile and two taps of my right fist against the left side of my chest. His expression softened, then he gave a similar salute.

Tuuli gave me a tight hug then looked at me, her big blue eyes wavering with unease.

“Bye, Myne. I’ll come on my next day off. Be good while I’m gone, okay?”

“Okay. I’ll be waiting for you.”

After seeing Dad and Tuuli off, I went into my chambers. Despite having my own room here, spending the night in the temple made me a little nervous.

My attendants were all surprised to see me arrive out of nowhere right before dinnertime.

“What brings you here today, Sister Myne?”

“Due to certain circumstances, my winter stay in the temple has been moved forward and now begins today.”

“What circumstances?” asked Delia, her head cocked to the side.

I shook my head. “I can’t give any details since nobles might be involved.”

Delia tried to start changing me into my blue robes, but I stopped her since I didn’t have any plans to go out today. That said, I didn’t have much else to do. I looked around the room, thinking about how I was usually home by this time.

“What do you all do when it gets this late?”

I could tell what Rosina did without even looking—she was playing her harspiel. She really did play for as long as she could before the seventh bell curfew.

Delia was carrying hot water from the kitchen, likely to prepare the bath. It seemed that bath time was where women polished their charms; I had a lot to learn from Delia’s girl power.

Gil was writing a report on his slate about the Myne Workshop’s activity for the day and the products it had finished. It was a report based on how the Gilberta Company managed its stock, and Lutz was having Gil write them as part of his training.

Fran was finalizing reports on the food and supplies consumed by the orphanage and my chambers so that he could prepare orders for more stock. He was busy every day with all sorts of different paperwork. Still, he said things were a lot easier on him now that he could split the work with Rosina and Wilma.

“...I guess I’ll write a letter to the High Priest requesting a meeting with him.”

I sat down at my work desk and began writing a letter to the High Priest, asking to talk to him so I could tell him what had happened. It would be days before he replied though, so who knew how long it would be before we could talk.

After finishing my letter, I began planning for the next picture books. Guided by Freida’s advice, I decided to make new children’s bibles with stories of the subordinate gods beneath the Eternal Five, organized by their season.

I ate a fancy dinner delivered to my table, took a lavish bath in hot water with Delia’s help, and then got in my warm bed alone. It was so big that I could stretch my arms and legs as much as I wanted. To my side I could see a table with a water pitcher, a cup, and a bell to summon my attendants.

“Goodnight, Sister Myne.”

“Goodnight, Delia. Goodnight, Rosina.”

The curtain around my canopy bed shut, leaving me alone on my wide bed in complete darkness. Despite the delicious food, the bath filled with warm water nobody got mad over me using, and the comfy bed with plenty of space... I would much rather have eaten around the table with my family, had a bath in a shallow tub that had only a little hot water while playing around with Tuuli, and be sleeping in a smaller bed while clinging to my family for extra warmth.

...Getting homesick after a single day away sure is lame.

I had attendants, but there was a firm line drawn between us—I was their master and they were my servants. They would treat me with respect, but I wasn't allowed to get emotionally involved with them. I was stuck in bed, more sad and alone than I could describe, wracked with fear of whoever was targeting me.

Morning in the temple came late. Or to be more precise, morning came early for attendants while I, on the other hand, was stuck in bed waiting for them to finish preparing breakfast. If I tried getting up before they were done, Delia would yell at me, angrily saying that I had to go back to sleep until they called for me. There I learned that noble daughters had to fake being asleep in bed until their attendants were ready for them.

Will she get mad if I sneakily read books to pass the time?

“Now then, let us begin practice.”

After a light breakfast, it was time to practice the harspiel with Rosina. She prepared the instruments with a smile, commenting on how lovely it was that she didn't have to wait for me to arrive at the temple anymore.

By the time she and I started practice, Delia and Gil were cleaning the room and drawing water while Fran was going to the High Priest to deliver my letter and give a brief rundown on the situation. When he got back, he said that the High Priest had given me a strict order to remain in my chambers until further notice while he investigated the situation. It seemed that I would be spending my days not only stuck in the temple, but stuck in my chambers as well.

Music practice ended at third bell. Since I couldn't leave my chambers, I passed my time teaching Delia letters and simple math while working out the plans for my next picture book.

“You're a surprisingly good teacher, Sister Myne. Muuuch easier to understand than Gil.”

“You think so? Perhaps I should teach in the temple school as well,” I said, my voice coming out a bit shyly since I wasn't used to

Delia complimenting me.

Fran gave me a somewhat dubious look and asked what the “temple school” was.

“A place of education where I will teach the kids to read and write.”

“...Is this plan set in stone?”

“Yes, I’ve already made plans to hold sessions throughout the winter.”

Fran blinked repeatedly in surprise, then slowly shook his head. “Sister Myne, I do not believe you have informed me about that. Please explain exactly what you intend to do and in what way.”

“Wha? But it’s all written down right here.”

I pulled out my winter schedule sheet and handed it to Fran. He looked over it, then murmured “This will be the temple school...?” with lowered eyes.

It seemed that he hadn’t fully understood me when I said I was going to educate the children. He had thought that Tuuli’s sewing classroom and Lutz teaching them to do winter handiwork would be the extent of their education.

“But y’know,” chimed in Gil, “I dunno how much you’re gonna need to teach them, Sister Myne. They can already read a bit thanks to the karuta and picture books you gave’m.” He shrugged and I faltered, stumbling over my words.

“I-I want them to learn to write too. It’ll be easier for them to work for nobles as attendants if they know how to read and write, surely. And if they know how to count and do math, they’ll even be able to run the workshop and orphanage by themselves. I think knowing these things is better than not knowing them.”

I brought up the workshop report Gil had been writing yesterday, which made my point click with everyone. Gil was still bad at reading large numbers, so he had been writing his reports with the help of the gray priests.

“Sister Myne, where do you intend to hold this temple school?”

“In the dining hall of the orphanage, so both boys and girls can participate. I’ll be the teacher.”

“Please leave teaching to the gray priests. That manner of activity is beneath you, Sister Myne.”

Fran and Rosina shot my idea down together. I was stuck working behind the scenes, as always.

Eventually, I decided to make something resembling a school curriculum, which I would teach Delia first in my chambers. Fran and Rosina would learn from my example, then do the teaching themselves in the dining hall. They would train gray priests who were formerly attendants to teach as well, then quit whenever the time was

right, thereby establishing the temple school.

...Darn. I kinda wanted to be a teacher, seeing as I'm apparently so good at it.

For the temple school, I established a goal of teaching all the kids to write the alphabet and do addition and subtraction with one-digit numbers. I had a bunch of stone slates and slate pens prepared, not to mention the children's bibles to use as textbooks.

Fourth bell rang not long after I had worked out the general flow of how things would go. I ate lunch and was drinking tea when Lutz visited.

"You holding up alright, Myne?"

He had finally been given the go-ahead to come and visit after Benno did a thorough check to make sure nobody suspicious was following him.

I raced down the stairs and ran to Lutz as he waved at me from the hallway.

"Lutz, gimme a hug!"

"Woah?!"

I jumped into Lutz's arms, demanding a hug; I had been so starved for warmth that I needed him to recharge me. In my Urano days I had been fine with nothing but books in my life, but perhaps due to adjusting to this child's body, or perhaps due to growing used to my huggy family, I now craved the warmth of other people.

"I'm so lonely without my family here. I wanna go home already."

"It's only been a single night, y'know?" Lutz gave an exasperated grin at my complaining and shook his head, but I couldn't help how I felt.

"I'll get used to it eventually. This is the loneliest I'll be all winter."

"I dunno about that. Who's to say it might not just get worse and worse?"

"...If it gets any worse than this, I might just die of loneliness."

I was stuck in my chambers without even the option to go to the book room to read, and there were no books in my chambers other than the children's bibles. If I had to keep living without my family here, I might very well lose the will to live.

"...That hardly sounds like a joke, 'cause you always do end up close to dying when I take my eyes off you."

"I'll suck it up and survive the loneliness, so I want you to suck this up and let me hug you."

"Fine, fine."

Lutz let me cling to him until I was satisfied. Then, my arms still around him, he looked over the report Gil had written and compared it to his own, pointing out any errors in his calculations.

I got various complaints from my attendants as I stabilized my emotions by clinging to Lutz. A few I remember:

“How shameless!”

“A proper lady would never...”

“Geez! You should at least go after a rich noble boy with lots of money.”

“Why don’t you rely on me like that, Sister Myne...?”

But I ignored them all. The winter ahead of me would be long and cold; for the sake of my mental health, I needed to get warmth wherever I could find it.

“Oh, right. Myne, the workshop’s out of stuff to do. What’s our next step? Starting the winter handiwork?”

The second round of printing was done, and although we had the stencils to print more, there was no more paper to turn into books. We couldn’t make any more either since the river was freezing cold now. Not to mention that now that winter preparations were done, we would be running out of soot for our ink.

“Okay. I’ll explain how the winter handiwork will go, so could you go get the tools and boards for reversi from the workshop?”

“Sure. Let’s go, Gil.”

“Right.”

Lutz and Gil came back carrying boards and tools. They set them on the table in the hall and I began explaining how to make reversi boards and disks.

“These thick boards are what we’re going to use as the game boards. Using a ruler and a soot pen, keep drawing straight lines until you have eight squares by eight squares,” I explained, drawing out example lines on the board using my own soot pen.

“Once the lines are drawn, you cut grooves along them using one of those.” I pointed at a carving tool with a triangular blade. I had ordered it from the smithy after asking a carpenter about triangular-bladed tools. “Once the grooves are dug out, draw the lines on again using ink. You’ll just be tracing the grooves so I think the ink should stay inside them pretty nicely, but do be careful not to let any splash out.”

“Alright.”

“Cut the thin boards into sixty-four squares to match the size of the game board’s squares, then polish them so they’re smooth and nice to touch. After that you just have to cover one side with ink, so once you’ve finished cutting them out all the hard work is over. Also...”

I explained that for faux-shogi, or rather faux-chess, you cut out the board just like you would for reversi. But instead of covering one side, you wrote a letter on them. That made Lutz grimace.

“Hey, Myne. Think we could print the letters on instead?”

“Why?”

“Not a lot of people in the orphanage know how to write, and not all of those who can are that great. These letters are gonna be small and I’m thinking it’ll be a problem if the writing’s too bad to read.”

“Mmm, good point... Guess I’ll make a stencil for it.”

Lutz wrote all the steps down in his diptych as I continued. I myself wrote down the things I would need to improve or think about in my own diptych.

Gil, who had been watching our standard discussion, glared at Lutz with his purple eyes. “...You’ve been having Sister Myne teach you everything like that, Lutz?”

“Yeah. She can’t work in the workshop since she’s a blue shrine maiden, so she’s gotta teach me what to do ahead of time so I can make sure the workshop gets it right.”

“I thought you knew everything and were like, amazing, but it’s actually Sister Myne who’s amazing,” Gil pouted, his cheeks puffed out.

I poked them with my finger. “Gil, Lutz really is amazing. He only needs to hear my explanation once before he can repeat it in the workshop and get stuff done. You were listening as well just now, but you wouldn’t be able to teach someone else what to do, would you?”

“...I wouldn’t.” Gil looked down at the floor, then shot his head back up and pointed at Lutz’s diptych. “But that’s just ‘cause I don’t have a diptych! I’d be amazing too if I had one!”

“Oh, right, you’ve learned to read and write now. I guess you might need one yourself soon if you’re going to be writing those workshop reports. I can’t go outside right now, but I’ll get one made for you when spring comes.”

“Really?! Alright, I’m definitely gonna beat Lutz!” Gil held his head high and declared himself Lutz’s rival, earning him a casual “Good luck winning before spring” in response. It seemed that Lutz would be going with Benno to neighboring towns next spring to look over the plant paper workshops, so he would want Gil to be running the whole Myne Workshop before then.

“Oh, right,” Lutz added. “Next time I come here, there’s gonna be an apprentice with me. Aaah, he’s actually pretty close to coming of age, but yeah.”

“Why? Is he going to take your place while you’re gone?” I tilted my head in confusion, and Lutz frowned a little.

“On paper he’s here to help with the workshop just like me, but Master Benno actually wants him to learn to act like an attendant.”

“Oh, right. He was mentioning that he wanted waiters for his Italian restaurant.” I added a note on my diptych to plan around that too.

“...Hey, Myne. I get reversi and all that, but what about the playing cards?”

“I wish we had different colored ink to use here, but there’s no point in wishing for the impossible. We’ll just use plain black ink for now.”

I drew the four card suits and the nine numbers used on my stone slate, then drew three diamonds in the middle of a large rectangle as an example.

“We’ll make four different sets of cards, one for each symbol, and differentiate the cards of each set using numbers.”

“That’s gonna be a lot of cards,” said Lutz.

“Hey, that symbol looks a bit like a divine instrument,” Gil observed proudly while pointing at the diamond symbols. “It’s kinda like Leidenschaft’s spear. And that other one looks like Flutrane’s staff.”

According to him, diamonds looked like the God of Fire’s spear, whereas spades looked like the Goddess of Water’s staff. Now that he mentioned it, the decoration around the divine spear’s tip and the divine staff’s feystones did indeed resemble those shapes. Incidentally, calling magic stones by their proper name “feystones” was getting drilled into my head since that was important knowledge for the upcoming Dedication Ritual. Nobles and their quibbling over details never gave me any time to rest.

“In that case, Gil. What about Schutzaria the Goddess of Wind?”

“Her shield’s a circle, so none of these fit. Geduldh the Goddess of Earth’s symbol is the chalice, so it’d look kinda like this...”

It seemed that a circle symbolized the Goddess of Wind’s shield, while an upside-down triangle symbolized the Goddess of Earth’s chalice. That neatly covered all four suits, and the change would probably make those in the temple more likely to accept them.

On Gil’s recommendation, I changed the card suits to spades, diamonds, circles, and upside-down triangles.

“I think I’ll make the jack, queen, and king cards be symbols too, then. Drawing art for each one would be a pain anyway.”

I replaced the jack with a sword to symbolize the God of Life, the queen with a crown to symbolize the Goddess of Light, and the king with a black cape to symbolize the God of Darkness. The main aim here was to make the designs as simple as possible.

I thought about what to do with the joker, and settled on a twisted ring to symbolize the Goddess of Chaos, who had fallen in love with the God of Darkness despite it being taboo, and spurred the God of Life’s jealousy to turn him into a stalker.

“Okay, perfect. Now they really do look like cards made in a temple.”

“Yeah, and they’ll be easy to understand since they show up on the karuta too.”

Gil and I congratulated ourselves on the card designs, but Lutz looked at the slate with a conflicted frown.

“Myne, you really gotta make stencils to print these. No way will these all match up if we try and wing it.”

“...That’s true. I’ll make the stencil.”

I made a stencil out of thick paper—a process I was now very used to—so that we could print the ink directly onto the board. I had more than enough time after all, and making stencils for something as simple as playing cards was a breeze.

“Alright, Myne. I’ve gotta go home now.”

I didn’t want Lutz to leave, but I couldn’t exactly ask him to stay overnight.

“Okay...” I nodded sadly, and Lutz pinched my cheeks with a troubled smile. I covered my cheek and glared at him.

“...Don’t look so sad. I’ll be back tomorrow with Tuuli.”

“You better, if you don’t want me to die of loneliness.”

After we saw Lutz off, Gil looked down at me with worry.

“You’re feeling lonely, Sister Myne?”

“Uh huh. I’m so used to living with my family that I really miss them already.”

I knew that staying in the temple was safer for me, but I wanted to go home. It had been my choice to come here, and yet I felt as though I had been abandoned.

“Want to hug me like you hugged Lutz?” asked Gil, trying to help. But before I could even respond, I heard a loud “Absolutely not!” from behind me.

I turned around in surprise to see Fran standing there with a scary look on his face. He walked up to Gil and chastised him quietly.

“Gil, Sister Myne is your master. Comforting her is not the place of an attendant. Lutz is a friend who she considers to be like family, and you are not in the same position as him.”

“...Got it.” Gil nodded, his teeth clenched in frustration.

Seeing that, Fran’s expression softened a little. He then knelt in front of me to look me directly in the eyes, his expression hardening once again.

“Sister Myne. I understand that your extreme circumstances have left you feeling uneasy. Out of concern for you, I will overlook Lutz and your family comforting you. However, I request that you maintain the proper distance between you and your attendants.”

He gave me a strict reminder not to be too friendly with my attendants, and I couldn’t help but look to where Lutz had been

moments ago. He was already gone, and a cold wind blew in from the empty doorway. It stung as it brushed my cheeks, but I was more worried about how lonely the winter would be than how cold it would be.

Meeting of the Minds

Three days after I started living in the temple, a letter arrived from the High Priest asking whether the ceremonial robes ordered from the Gilberta Company were ready yet. Disappointed that he hadn't written to establish a meeting, I had Rosina call for Lutz. He arrived in no time, since he was at the workshop teaching the orphanage kids to do their winter handiwork.

"Did something happen, Myne?"

"The High Priest sent me a letter asking when the ceremonial robes will be ready. Sorry, but could you ask Benno about them when you drop by the store for lunch?"

And so he did, returning with the answer that they would take three days to finish at the absolute minimum. To give them a little leeway, I sent a reply to the High Priest saying the robes would take five days to finish if they worked their absolute hardest. That would hopefully prevent him from rushing them too much.

When Fran brought me the High Priest's response, he also had with him a letter of summons for Benno. I passed this on to Lutz when he visited my chambers to say goodbye and give me an update on the workshop.

"It looks like he's calling Lord Karstedt over seven days from now, and he wants Benno to deliver the finished robes then," I said, clinging to him all the while.

"Alright. I'll give it to him on my way home. But y'know, Myne... You haven't gotten better at all. Are you doing okay?"

"Not really. I want to go back home at least once before the snow falls."

Far from getting used to the loneliness, my homesickness was actually getting worse. It was pretty clear too, as I gradually spent more and more time clinging to Lutz and Tuuli whenever they came to my room. And Mom not being able to visit due to her pregnancy definitely wasn't helping either.

"You know I won't be able to visit every day once the snow starts, right?" said Lutz with a sigh while gently patting my head.

Dad was busy enough with his afternoon shifts that he could only visit once a week, while Tuuli could only visit every other day. I would get even more lonely when Lutz stopped being able to visit every day to watch over the workshop and their winter handiwork.

“I wish snow just didn’t exist.” My arms around Lutz tightened as I thought about how cold it was, cold enough for snow to start falling at any moment.

On the day of the meeting, snow began to fall just before third bell. It wasn’t enough for the snow to settle, but everyone knew that winter had begun for real.

“Do you think it’ll settle?”

“Not yet, Sister Myne. There will be nothing to interrupt your meeting,” assured Rosina.

After finishing harspiel practice, I was instructed on how to properly greet Karstedt. Rosina had been forcing me to repeat a beautiful curtsy over and over again.

The road to being elegant is not an easy one...

“Sister Myne, Benno will be arriving this afternoon. There is not much time left to practice.”

Today’s meeting was scheduled for fifth bell. Benno would be coming to see me in my chambers beforehand, under the guise of thanking me for giving him a connection to an archnoble. In the meantime I had to learn a greeting respectable enough that I wouldn’t embarrass myself in front of Karstedt. And so, I put my all into practicing.

“Hi Benno, Mark. Oh? Where’s Lutz?”

Benno and Mark entered my room, the former wearing winter clothes with long sleeves in the style of nobles and the latter carrying a box. I pursed my lips in a pout, having expected Lutz to come with them.

“It started snowing, so I’m having Lutz prioritize his work in the Myne Workshop. He should arrive with the finished handiwork soon—one copy of each. Make sure you bring them to the meeting.”

“The winter handiwork? But why?” I tilted my head in confusion, not understanding why Benno would want me to bring toys to a meeting with the High Priest and an archnoble.

“My gut tells me those things are gonna make a big splash. I figure now’s a good time to hear what the High Priest and an archnoble think about them before we put ’em out for the public.”

“Mmm, assuming there’s never been anything like them before, I think they’ll have a really big impact,” I answered after thinking back to how playing cards and reversi had impacted Earth, and Benno glared at me with dripping displeasure.

“...A really big impact? You blasted out paper and printing without considering the consequences at all, and yet you’re warning me about how important a few toys are gonna be?”

“Well, to be clear, I do know that paper and printing are significant enough that they’ll change the course of history. But my main reason for making those was because I needed them.”

It was hard not to know just how huge of an impact printing had on past civilizations and culture in general. And yet, to me, they were just necessary steps I had to take to get my books.

“What’s wrong, Benno? You look kinda sick.”

“I am. Of you. We’re gonna be talking to the High Priest and an archnoble, y’know?”

Benno sure has a sensitive side, I thought while Benno bent over with a hand on his stomach. I had always thought of him as a hardboiled guy who loved to pick a fight with anyone, so it was a little weird to see him so nervous.

“Why are you so nervous, Benno? You’ve never had any problems antagonizing the guildmaster and all the vested interests. These two are actually nice people. You’ll be fine.”

“Don’t put the guildmaster on the same level as an archnoble! Whose fault do you think all this is?!” shouted Benno before collapsing onto the table and pressing his forehead against it.

A strand of his milk-tea hair, previously slicked back with what was presumably some kind of hair gel, drooped onto the table.

“Master Benno, please do not beat your head against the table. Your hair is getting disheveled,” noted Mark with an amused smile.

Benno hatefully slicked the hair back into place before glaring at me with his dark-red eyes. “...Bah. It’s at times like this—and only times like this—that I really wish you could give me some of your blissful ignorance.”

“Wha? But you’re just delivering some robes, aren’t you? I remember how happy you were to gain a connection with an archnoble.”

“Idiot! Use your head and think! In what world would they summon me to the temple just to deliver an order? They’re gonna be drilling me for all the information I have on you,” ranted Benno with a glare, compelling me to point at myself in surprise.

“Um, me? What exactly would they want to learn about me?”

“I can expect that we’ll share all the information we’ve dug up on the head of the Ink Guild, and then we’ll talk about what to do with you. I have information from the lower city, the archnoble has information from the Noble’s Quarter, and the High Priest wants to know everything we do.”

Speaking of which, the High Priest had also talked about gathering information. And that I should stay inside my room until he had finished doing so. I guess this meeting meant that he was indeed done.

“Benno, has anything else happened with the head of the Ink Guild?”

“No, nothing yet. The colder it gets, the more strange people loitering about outside a store stand out. Either they don’t want to push things, or they’ve already found out what they wanted to know and are waiting for the winter socializing to find out more.”

While the city was blocked in by snow, the nobles who had traveled to farming towns over the Harvest Festival would return to the Noble’s Quarter. The archduke would be staying in the Sovereignty—the central region which held the highest position among the regions ruled by archdukes, known as duchies—for a couple of weeks at the end of spring, but the primary time for land-owning nobles to socialize was the winter. That was where they met to exchange information with nobles of other provinces and strengthen old bonds.

“Sister Myne. Master Benno. It is time.”

“Thank you, Fran. Then let us depart.”

I nodded at Benno and had Fran carry the finished sets of winter handiwork that Lutz had brought. After double checking Mark’s box containing the robes, we left my chambers. The corridors to the High Priest’s room were cold and unforgiving. So cold that I really didn’t want to leave my room at all.

When we arrived, Fran rang the bell and watched the door open. Karstedt had already arrived, and I could see him gracefully drinking tea at the guest table.

“High Priest. Lord Karstedt. I am glad the gods ordained we meet again. To me this is an auspicious day blessed by Geduldh the Goddess of Earth’s warmth, and I pray that you feel the same.”

I had only ever seen Karstedt clad in full plate armor, but now he was wearing the fine clothing of the nobility. His reddish-brown hair was slicked back with the same kind of gel as Benno’s, and I could see at a glance that he had kind of a wide forehead.

His silky velvet-esque shirt had long, drooping sleeves that I had come to expect from nobles, and I could see they were made from layers of various cloth with fancy lace holding them together.

His back was wide and his body visibly muscular thanks to his training, which made him a presence hard to ignore. But his fierce aura seemed more gentle now than when he had been wearing his armor, and his light-blue eyes appeared a little softer today.

“I am glad to see you well, Myne the apprentice shrine maiden.”

“I bless you from the bottom of my heart, Lord Karstedt.” I finished my greeting without messing anything up, and Benno introduced himself in turn.

We then sat down in the seats offered to us by the High Priest, with our servants standing behind us. The High Priest was seated at one end of the table with Karstedt to his left, me to his right, and Benno at the other end.

“Thank you all for coming,” said the High Priest. “First, we shall see the ceremonial robes.”

Mark took one step forward and handed the wooden box to Benno, who opened and held it out to Karstedt. Its insides were lined with cloth that enveloped the ceremonial robes, which were as deep ocean-blue as the last ones. Its wavy embroidery glimmered under the light of several candles that lit up the otherwise dim room.

“These are Sister Myne’s ceremonial robes.”

Karstedt glanced over them, then asked me if they were what I had ordered. I nodded and confirmed that they were, having already seen the finished product and been fitted for them.

“In that case, I present the robes to you, Sister Myne.”

“I shall be eternally grateful.”

I took the robes, and once I had them, Karstedt jutted out his chin to signal something. It was then that I first noticed that the person behind him was not his attendant but was in fact Damuel, the knight from before, perhaps serving as Karstedt’s page. He handed Benno a bag with gold inside.

After checking the contents, Benno handed the bag to Mark.

“Benno, I am told you worked exceedingly fast to complete this order. You have done well. Karstedt. Damuel. Your sentences have now been fulfilled.” At the High Priest’s words, everyone—Benno, of course, but Karstedt and Damuel as well—let out sighs of relief.

I asked Fran to take care of the box containing my robes. He nodded and removed it from the table.

“Attendants, step back,” commanded the High Priest while putting in place a magic tool meant to prevent eavesdropping. It was a wide-range tool that affected a wider area rather than just individuals, since Benno lacked mana and could not power a tool of his own. The High Priest placed four feystones around us, then chanted something which sent a wall of faint blue light bursting out of the tool and enveloping us in a cube.

I could see the attendants standing back behind the wall of light, but couldn’t hear anything from behind it. It was easy to guess that they couldn’t hear anything on this side either.

There sure is a magic tool for everything, I thought to myself as Benno flinched beside me. I had gotten pretty used to seeing this kind of stuff, but to people of the lower city pretty much anything magic was cause for surprise. That said, Benno wasn’t the owner of a large store for nothing. All he did was give a slight flinch, without shouting

or looking around like I would have in the past.

“Now then, Benno. We have much to discuss.”

Benno crossed his arms in front of his chest. “...My knowledge is yours.”

“I heard that the Ink Guild began investigating Myne immediately following the signing of a magic contract between them, with Lutz being their first target. Is that correct?”

“Yes. In general, information is gathered before a contract is signed in order to influence the proceedings as favorably as possible,” explained Benno. “I cannot imagine why they would begin gathering information *after* the contract was signed.”

The High Priest nodded and looked at me. “Have you met the head of the Ink Guild before, Myne?”

“No. Benno hid me while the contract was being negotiated, so I know neither his name nor his face.”

“The head of the Ink Guild has deep connections with nobles,” began Benno, “and not much good is said about him. I determined that minimizing Sister Myne’s contact with him would be ideal, and had her wait in another room while he visited.”

He explained why he hadn’t let me meet the head of the Ink Guild, which made the High Priest let out a laugh with a slight grin of approval.

“You are a wise man indeed, Benno. I applaud your decision. The man you are speaking of is Wolf, correct?”

“What rumors have you heard? What led you to conclude he would bring harm to the apprentice shrine maiden?”

The High Priest and Karstedt asked Benno a stream of questions. I knew nothing about the head of the Ink Guild and thus had no choice but to remain silent.

“Wolf is the head of the Ink Guild, yes. I have heard that he is willing to engage in criminal acts to strengthen his relationships with nobles, but I know not whether these rumors are true, so please forgive my lack of details.”

Karstedt, his brow furrowed, rubbed his chin. “In that case, I would assume he started gathering information so brazenly because the contract has been signed, and so he no longer cares if your relationship suffers.”

The suggestion made Benno widen his eyes. It wasn’t easy to void a magic contract, which necessitated significant preparation before one was signed. But thinking about it another way, that also meant it didn’t matter how blatantly antagonistic the Ink Guild were now that it was signed. After all, even if they escalated things to the point of harming me, the contract couldn’t be voided without the consent of all parties involved.

Karstedt surmised the Ink Guild had exploited that, and for a second I saw an extremely bitter grimace on Benno's face.

"Benno, what do you think Wolf stands to gain from gathering information on Myne? I would like to hear your perspective as both a merchant and one who lives in the lower city," asked the High Priest.

Benno chose his words carefully. "To us merchants, Sister Myne's value is her knowledge of seemingly infinite new products, though few know how much she is truly worth. If Wolf were one of those few, he would no doubt seek to bring her into the Ink Guild. But Sister Myne has already joined the Merchant's Guild and my Gilberta Company. In which case, he likely intends to either rely on money to gather what knowledge he can, kidnap her to extract her knowledge, or take those dear to her hostage to blackmail her."

Karstedt looked at me dubiously. He was no doubt thinking it impossible that a girl as young as myself would have knowledge that valuable.

"However, it is my belief that he would not be able to learn everything she knows, even through kidnapping and blackmail," Benno continued. "To maximize the amount he gained from her, he would need to keep her confined in an isolated location for extended periods of time, which would be exceedingly strenuous."

I shuddered at the thought of that coming true, having not considered the possibility that someone would kidnap and imprison me for my knowledge. I finally understood just how well Benno had been treating me, and the thought of what could have happened had I met someone else instead sent more shivers down my spine.

"Why would keeping her confined be strenuous?" Karstedt asked casually. "It should be simple so long as the kidnappers have a spare room or country mansion. Surely the kidnapping itself would be more of a challenge."

The fact he spoke about confining people so knowledgeably scared me.

"If her kidnapper is not fully aware of Sister Myne's poor health, she will die under their care in a matter of days. In Sister Myne's case, the confinement will be more strenuous than the kidnapping."

"Yes, I must agree. She spent days bedridden with sickness after only half a day in the repentance chamber. If treated as a standard prisoner, she would die before being able to teach them anything of value." The High Priest agreed with Benno on the spot; it seemed that the repentance chamber incident had really stuck with him.

I wished he would just forget it, though. I got fevers like that all the time. It wasn't anybody's fault. Also, while he was at it, I wished he would forget that I was the only blue shrine maiden to ever be put in the repentance chamber.

“It’s likely, then, that Wolf plans to sell her off to nobles after learning what he can from her,” concluded Karstedt.

Benno furrowed his brows in confusion. “...I know that Sister Myne suffers from the Devouring, but is there another reason why nobles would want her?”

The High Priest exchanged a glance with Karstedt, then gave Benno a nod.

“I do not intend to inform you of all the details, but yes, there is another reason. As mentioned, it is most likely that Wolf intends to sell Myne to nobles after getting his hands on her. But it is also possible that a noble has ordered Wolf to kidnap her so that they can stage a rescue and indebt her to them. Once she’s rescued, they might even claim that she was their child all along. It is also possible that a wider quest for vengeance plays a part in this, which means the threat of assassination must be considered.”

...Gaaah! I can already hear Benno demanding to know what I’ve done! I can already hear the yelling! Not the thunder, anything but the thunder!

Prior to the High Priest listing out every possibility one by one, I had just thought that the Ink Guild probing for information about me was kinda gross and nothing more. It hadn’t even occurred to me that I was in that much danger. Now I could understand why the High Priest had ordered me to stay in my chambers.

“Benno,” began the High Priest, “you will continue to hide information from your business associates. Myne will not be leaving the temple over the winter. When she leaves her chambers, it will only be to perform rituals or visit the orphanage. With gray priests accompanying her, she should be safe. Our true problems begin in spring.”

His words earned him nods from both Benno and Karstedt.

“Because they too will be gathering information and allies over the winter,” Benno elaborated.

“We must think of a plan at once. Benno, what means are there to control this thing?” said the High Priest, referring to me.

Everyone looked in my direction.

Eventually, Benno shook his head slowly with an exhausted expression. “I do not know. She can escalate something to a ridiculous degree in a matter of moments, and if you take your eyes off her she could be on death’s door by the next bell. If I knew a way to keep her under control, I would already be using it.”

“As expected. I suppose keeping her within arm’s reach is all one can do.”

The High Priest and Benno both looked at me and gave heavy sighs in unison. They then looked at each other with wry smiles. It

seemed they had bonded.

“Myne, you cause problems every time you do anything. From now on, you will get my or Benno’s permission before taking any new course of action, or developing any new product,” said the High Priest, reminding me of the orphanage’s winter handiwork.

Benno’s keen acumen had once again saved me. I picked up the bundle of winter handiwork that Fran had left on the floor for me.

“...I imagine you’ll want to see these, then. It’s the winter handiwork I’m having the orphanage do.”

“Ah, I do remember you mentioning something like that. Show me.”

I pulled out the playing cards, reversi, and faux-chess, lining them up next to each other along the table. Benno leaned forward to look at them too, since although he had heard me explain each one before, he had never actually seen them.

“What are these?”

“Those are playing cards. There are a lot of games you can play with them, but I intend to start off by teaching the kids in the orphanage to play a game called concentration. You mix the cards up and then lay them on the table with the art side facing down. You then flip over two cards, and if both are the same number you keep them. Whoever has the most cards at the end of the game wins.”

It was hard for the younger kids to hold a full hand of wooden cards in their small hands, so concentration was the only game I was planning on showing them for the time being.

The rules intrigued Karstedt, and so we started playing, using only half of the deck to save time. Suffice it to say that the High Priest with his superb memory absolutely crushed us.

“Like I said, there are a lot of games you can play with them. They’ll be easier to use once we’ve worked out a formula for thicker paper and can make them out of that instead of wood.”

I taught them about blackjack, poker, and hearts, among other games, and it looked like Karstedt was pretty pleased by the cards overall.

“We have fortune-telling cards that are activated using mana, but no cards made for amusement. And most of all, it’s good that you can play so many games with just one deck of cards. No doubt these will grow very popular with nobles.”

“They’re also good for learning numbers. I made them so the kids in the orphanage can learn to do math,” I explained.

The High Priest nodded before pointing to the reversi board. “What about this, then?”

“This is reversi. There are tiles called ‘stones’ painted black on one side and white on the other. You place the stones in the boxes, and

when stones of one color get stuck between stones of the other, they change color. Whoever has the most stones of their color in the end wins.”

The High Priest seemed the most interested in reversi. We started playing, me as his opponent, and I explained the rules as we went. Stones were placed, stones were flipped, and after all the squares were filled the board was covered in white. I had won.

“...I lost?”

“It’s hard to win right after learning the rules. I’m sure you’ll start beating me after we play a few more games.” I shrugged as the High Priest stared at the board in a daze.

I had beat the High Priest since he was playing reversi for the first time and didn’t know any of the strategies, but he was smart enough that he would work them out for himself before long. I had gone all-out on him specifically because I knew this was my only opportunity to beat him.

“Then we shall play again. I will win this time.”

“High Priest, let’s save the rematch for next time. I’ll play you again if you buy the game.”

“Very well. Consider it purchased.”

Benno’s shoulders trembled just a little bit after seeing the High Priest buy it instantly. He gave me a subtle *good job* sign beneath the table.

“Ahem! And finally, what are these?”

“Um, these are (chess) pieces. They’re played on the same board as reversi. Each type of piece moves in a different way, and you win by moving one of your pieces onto your opponent’s king.”

I cleaned up the reversi stones and explained how each chess piece moved while Karstedt looked at the board with narrowed, contemplative eyes.

“...This looks like gewinnen.”

“Oh, so another game like this exists? Should I make some changes so they’re not as similar?”

My understanding was that even on Earth, board games had existed for a very long time. It was only natural that this world would have something similar.

“No need. It’s a game played among nobles and it requires mana. The goal is to take territory and the fighting strategies are completely different. This game will do just fine in the lower city, I imagine.”

“I don’t think they’ll sell much at all if nobles aren’t buying them...”

There weren’t many people in the lower city rich enough to spend money on something that was purely for entertainment; just about everyone had their hands full just keeping their families alive. My

safest bet would be to bundle chess with reversi and market it as an alternative way of playing gewinnen.

With our discussion on the winter handiwork over, the High Priest took down the soundproof barrier. He and Karstedt summoned their attendants, then purchased the reversi board, the stones, and the playing cards respectively.

I sold them at four large silvers—a premiere price since we weren't planning to sell them until spring started. Considering that I anticipated their market price to start at around five to seven small silvers, we kinda ripped them off.

“Our association continues to be fruitful, Benno; I approve. May you be blessed with the divine protection of Geduldh the Goddess of Earth.”

“I thank you for your time, honorable High Priest. If you will excuse me, I will now take my leave. It has been a pleasure, Lord Karstedt. Sister Myne.” Benno crossed his arms before his chest and exited, Mark doing the same behind him before following suit.

After seeing them go, I looked at the High Priest. “In that case, I believe I will depart as well. It has been a—”

“We have more to discuss with you. Take this.”

He set four of the sound-blocking magic tools he often used down onto the table. The High Priest, Karstedt, and I each took one, with Damuel reaching for the one remaining.

Punishment for the Knight's Order and My Future

Benno left the room and Damuel headed to the now-empty seat. I stood up myself, thinking that as a commoner I should sit at the foot of the table, but the High Priest stopped me.

“Stay seated where you are, Myne.”

“Wha? But...”

I glanced at Damuel but he just looked at me, the corners of his gray eyes crinkled in a calm smile as he sat down. It would have been a bit much for me to force him off the seat so I could sit there myself, so I just sat back down where I was.

Once everyone was in their seats, the High Priest looked over all those gathered.

“Now then, Myne. I will explain to you what punishments the archduke decreed after being informed of the incident during the trombe extermination.”

“The punishments?”

I had expected that Shikza was going to be punished, but I didn't want to know what that punishment would be. All I wanted was to never see him again. And as if sensing that, the High Priest lowered his eyes.

“...It is not hard to imagine that this is not information you wish to know, and I myself am hesitant to inform you of the matters of the nobility. But this information will be essential in preparing you for your future.” He let out a sigh, then looked at Karstedt and Damuel before dryly continuing his explanation.

“The archduke was extremely displeased that a knight assigned to protect the apprentice shrine maiden not only harmed her, but made the extermination more difficult. First, he ordered Karstedt to be more strict in his training of newcomers, and docked his pay for three months. He also ordered him to provide one quarter of the funds for your new robes.

“Now, as for Shikza... A knight who refuses to listen to orders in battle would bring only harm to his fellows, and by attacking the one he had been assigned to protect, he has dishonored himself as a knight. The archduke has determined that a soldier of the Knight's Order disobeying orders and abandoning his duty was worthy of grave punishment.

“Thus, the archduke decreed that Shikza was to be executed. Under normal circumstances his entire family would be punished alongside him, but as that would likely earn you only more ire, Myne, the archduke gave Shikza’s father two choices: He could either allow his family to be punished, or he could sign a contract to never deal with you again and pay a hefty fee. If he signed the contract and paid the fee, his family would escape punishment, and Shikza would be recorded as having died an honorable death in battle.”

I swallowed hard. Not for a second had I expected that the archduke would have Shikza executed. Considering that Shikza was a noble and I was a commoner, I figured he would get a light punishment at worst.

“Shikza’s father paid the fee and swore not to involve himself with you—said fee went toward paying half the cost of your robes. And so, it was written that Shikza died honorably in battle while serving the Knight’s Order.”

I realized then that the execution had already happened. I reflexively looked to Damuel, knowing that him sitting there meant he had avoided being executed. But maybe he had been given some other harsh punishment.

The High Priest looked at Damuel as well, likely having noticed my gaze.

“Damuel paid one quarter of the cost of your robes, and was demoted to the rank of apprentice for one year. His sentence was lightened solely due to your defense of him.”

“My defense?”

I didn’t recall defending him, especially not in any official setting. I cocked my head to the side in confusion, and Damuel smiled as he let out a friendly laugh.

“You defended me in front of Lord Ferdinand, remember? You said I had been kind to you, warned Shikza off, and attempted to help you. If you hadn’t, I would have been punished just as harshly as Shikza was.”

It seemed that under normal circumstances, he would have been executed all the same for failing to protect me. But my word had provided evidence that Damuel had tried to stop him, but could do nothing due to being of a lower status than Shikza, which lessened his sentence. He had been demoted back to the rank of apprentice despite having finally come of age, but considering the alternative was being executed alongside Shikza, that was hardly anything at all.

“My family’s bottom of the barrel even among laynobles, and my whole life I’ve been walked over by people of higher status than me. Almost nobody’s ever stuck their neck out and helped me before. It’s hard to describe how happy I was when I learned you had asked Lord

Ferdinand to lighten my sentence.”

I got the feeling he was exaggerating the significance of what I had done, but judging by how unfair his upbringing seemed to be, I could guess that even laynobles had it rough despite being nobles.

The High Priest spoke up. “Furthermore, Damuel has been assigned to be your bodyguard during his year as an apprentice.”

“Wha? Bodyguard?!”

“You truly are in significant danger,” said the High Priest, looking over me with his light-gold eyes before turning to Karstedt. “But you have no sense of self-preservation, so we will need to explain.”

Karstedt met his gaze and nodded slowly before looking me right in the eyes. His light-blue eyes that had looked a little softer just moments ago hardened once more.

“It is now known to all archnobles that there exists an apprentice shrine maiden with value to be exploited,” Karstedt began. “You were given blue robes despite your lowborn status, you accompanied the Knight’s Order, and you completed your duty with an enormous display of mana that all those in the Order saw. The fact that the archduke himself permitted you to wear blue robes has only given weight to the rumors of your worth.”

The Knight’s Order was a gathering of nobles; if scorning me as a commoner and treating me as such would bring misfortune upon their houses as it had Shikza’s, then they had to approach from another angle. Apparently it was only natural for nobles to immediately consider ways they could exploit me once they found out what the High Priest had said and how much mana I had.

“You are a Devouring commoner that nobody has signed a contract with, but everyone knows you are in Lord Ferdinand’s custody. We believe a significant number of nobles will begin currying favor with Lord Ferdinand and the archduke while approaching you on seemingly friendly terms so that they may one day exploit you.”

If we assumed that Wolf, the head of the Ink Guild, was connected to those nobles, then Karstedt had an idea what might be happening.

“A noble who wanted to exploit you might have Wolf kidnap you so that they could then rescue you, putting you in a debt of gratitude to them. When dealing with nobles one must always assume they are attempting to take advantage of others, and if you keep that in mind, your life should not be at risk barring extenuating circumstances. But no such guarantees can be made for your family and friends...”

The High Priest continued for him. “For example, it is possible that those working alongside Wolf will have you kidnapped, then sold to the archduke of an opposing duchy, who will then claim that you were his daughter all along. In that case, your actual family would be nothing but an obstacle—a reminder of the truth. They would

therefore be silenced, one way or another.”

The High Priest’s prediction was so grim that I gasped in shock. The very thought of putting my family in danger sent a shiver running down my spine. I balled my fists tightly in my lap, but I couldn’t stop them from trembling.

And on top of everything, Damuel explained to me from his perspective as a laynoble how nobles thought of me.

“Most laynobles are still full of scorn and contempt toward you. They don’t want to accept that a lowborn commoner has so much mana. And honestly, I would have had a hard time believing a Devouring commoner could have that much mana myself had I not seen it with my own eyes.”

It seemed that the laynobles were more concerned with hating me out of envy than exploiting me.

“But no laynoble would oppose Lord Ferdinand head-on,” Damuel continued, eyeing Karstedt and the High Priest nervously. “If they do anything, it’ll be through archnobles. And in my opinion, I think you’re most at risk from people who have more personal reasons to hate you.”

“Shikza’s father is more concerned with the continuation of their house than anything, but his mother isn’t,” said Karstedt. “They had been forced to give Shikza to the temple due to circumstance and their small amount of mana, and she was really happy when he finally returned home thanks to the Sovereignty’s purge. I’ve heard that she... that she hates you with all her heart, Sister Myne.”

I shuddered. From my own experience, I could sympathize well with the seething rage one might feel from losing a family member. I couldn’t even imagine how furious I myself would be with anyone who had hurt my own family. And right now, that fury was being directed at me. I could live with that if that fury ended with me, but I was terrified of it being aimed at my friends and family.

“...Dangerous nobles, who might attempt an assassination. Are there any nobles foolish enough to bring their house down out of spite?” asked the High Priest. I clenched my fists in my lap, waiting for Damuel’s answer.

With a sad expression, he whispered: “I don’t know. If Shikza’s mother actually does harm Sister Myne, their house will be finished for sure. But a woman’s wrath knows no bounds, and I don’t know what it will drive her to do. I can’t know.”

Karstedt’s eyebrows sank into a deep frown. “If she’s willing to destroy her house to satisfy her lust for revenge, the situation may be worse than we thought.”

It seemed that nobles were generally restrained by the fear of ruining their house, the honor of their ancestors, and the lives of their

family.

“I never thought Wolf or Shikza’s mom would be so dangerous,” said Damuel.

It turned out that Wolf regularly went to the Noble’s Quarter to sell ink. He was somewhat well known among nobles since they were the ones who most purchased and used ink. However, none of them knew that he was known in the lower city as a criminal who would do anything to strengthen his connections with the nobility.

“My plan had been to raise you here as an apprentice shrine maiden so that you could one day wed into a noble house, but now that plan will have to change,” said the High Priest.

“What?”

Is he saying he was going to make me marry a noble? I don’t think I’d agree to that; it sure isn’t something I’ve ever considered myself!

I blinked in confusion, failing to fully grasp what the High Priest was saying. I would rather he not try to plan my life out like that, especially when it came to something as important as marriage. Just think of what poor man would be forced to marry me for fear of going against the High Priest’s authority. I would feel so bad for him.

“I wasn’t planning on marrying any nobles.”

“I believe I told you that regardless of whether you intended to sign with a noble, you would one day bear the children of a noble. I had thought to culture you here and give you experience as a shrine maiden so that one might accept you as a wife, but the situation has changed.”

I certainly did remember him saying something like that when we were talking about Rosina becoming my attendant. It seemed that even then the High Priest had already intended to play the matchmaker for me. Just how much did this man love to give himself extra work?

As I was caught up in awe of just how earnest the High Priest was and how extreme his sense of responsibility was, he glanced over at Karstedt.

“Myne, it is also likely that you, your friends, and your family will be in danger if you remain on your own. It is for everyone’s benefit that you are adopted by a noble as soon as possible.”

Being adopted by a noble meant cutting myself off from my family and living with nobles in the Noble’s Quarter.

...I’ll have to leave my family again?

A tremble ran through my heart. Fear had been bubbling up within me as my time alone in the temple went on—fear that my bonds with my family were weakening in their absence—and all that fear exploded at once.

“Karstedt will be able to protect you to some degree if he adopts

you, and I can guarantee the strength of his character. Will you do it, Karstedt?"

"Anything for a friend, Lord Ferdinand."

The conversation continued without me as I watched on in a daze.

Karstedt leaned forward to get a closer look at me. He was an archnoble, his eyes crinkled warmly, and his muscular body was primed to protect me. Considering how much trust the High Priest had in him, I could guess that I would find no better adoptive parent anywhere else.

"Myne, will you become my adopted daughter?"

"No."

I shot down his act of good will with a single word. Everyone stared at me, their eyes wide with a mix of surprise and disbelief.

"Sister Myne," began Damuel in a panic, "an adoption like this is better than anything you could wish for! Why would you turn down Lord Ferdinand's and Lord Karstedt's kindness?!"

"Calm down, Damuel. Myne, why do you refuse?" The High Priest's quiet voice was tinged with anger. But still, I couldn't say yes.

"It's just not possible. Spending the whole winter alone in the temple is already breaking my heart; I can't agree to leave my family for the rest of my life. I just can't." I shook my head hard, and as I did so I could feel my mana stir together with my swelling emotions. It was surging up from within me. "I want to go home. I don't want to leave my family ever again!"

"Calm down, Myne!" exclaimed the High Priest as he stood up with a clatter from his chair, immediately pushing a clear, thumb-sized gemstone against my forehead. The stone turned light yellow in mere moments—a nigh-instantaneous change which made the High Priest balk.



“Karstedt, Damuel—do you have any empty feystones?!”

“Sir!”

Karstedt and Damuel both hurriedly pulled out feystones, which the High Priest grabbed before picking me up and striding into his hidden room.

“I shall take her to my workshop to minimize the damage!”

Upon entering the room he sat down on the bench, set me down in front of him, and then put another feystone to my forehead. Stone after stone changed colors, and I could feel the mana stirring within me being sucked away.

“I know we are so close to the Dedication Ritual, but still, you have let too much mana build up within you. So foolish.”

“...That’s because I’ve been stuck in my chambers lately, and not offering up any mana.”

It felt like my emotions had been sucked out along with the mana. I wiped the tears from my eyes and let out a sigh. But still, despite all that, the heat attempting to rampage inside of me had not been entirely quelled, and I lacked the energy to squash it back into its box.

“I have to say, you seemed quite mentally unstable there. Did something happen?”

“It’s all your fault. If you hadn’t dug through my memories...”

Thanks to the High Priest’s magic tool, I had remembered with perfect clarity a world and a time I could never return to. I saw my old mom, talked to her, and ached for the family I had lost. I had been so busy here that I had done my best not to think about my past family, but he had dug the memories up and left a hole in my heart that would not heal.

Which was exactly why I resolved to do my best to make sure I didn’t lose my new family, and why it had hurt that, immediately after making that decision, I had been forced to stay inside the temple. I was still overcome by a feeling of loss since I hadn’t had time to heal by spending time with my family.

“...So that is why, then.”

The High Priest glanced away, his brow furrowed with regret. It hit me that he hadn’t used the magic tool because he wanted to, and that he had been hit with the weight of my emotions too while we were synchronized. I cursed myself for my lack of tact.

“I’m sorry. You didn’t deserve that,” I said, squeezing the High Priest’s sleeve as he pressed yet another feystone against my forehead. “You had to do what you did to make sure I’m not a threat, and it’s thanks to that I’m still alive at all. I know you did the right thing.

“It’s just, when I think about the family I’ll never see again, I remember how important my new family is to me... But I have to

spend all winter here, alone. It's so lonely I could just die. And if you tell me now that I'll never be able to see them again at all, maybe I will..."

My heart started to hurt as I confessed how I felt, and the tears welling in my eyes made the High Priest's face distort in front of me.

"Myne, contain yourself!"

"I'll never see my family again if a noble adopts me!"

"Myne!" The High Priest, his voice risen in a panic, grabbed my arm and pulled me toward him. I fell into his arms, and was soon enveloped in his long, drooping sleeves.

I looked up at the High Priest, blinking in surprise, and saw him grimacing as he looked back down at me.

"A... hug such as this will calm you, correct?"

"...Yes."

Our positions were the reverse of what they had been after using the magic tool. Hearing the High Priest struggle to say "hug" was kinda cute, and I let out a small giggle. But it was kinda uncomfortable for him to hug me while I was standing, so I sat on his lap and searched for a more comfortable position.

"...Myne, it seems that you have already calmed down."

"Not yet."

I couldn't wrap my arms around the High Priest like I could with Lutz or Tuuli; all I could do was lean against him while sitting on his thigh.

"This is perfect. Just keep squeezing me."

"I do not think this is perfect at all," he said with a frown, but did as I asked without untangling himself from me. His warmth and steady breathing calmed the storm in my heart.

Only after seeing that I had well and truly calmed down did the High Priest murmur an exasperated "What can be done with you..." Then, like chastising a rebellious child, he explained to me why I had no choice but to be adopted by a noble.

"Unlike a normal Devouring child, you possess an enormous amount of mana. Far too much to be ignored."

"...Do I really have that much mana?"

I could imagine that I had more mana than most people due to how the knights had reacted during the Healing Ritual, but I hadn't thought it was an "enormous" amount.

The High Priest's expression tightened as he looked down at me.

"It is too much mana for an average noble to contain, even after contracting with you. And it must be considered that your capacity for mana will grow as you do. You will need to learn to control the mana packed within you, and master the techniques necessary for putting it to good use."

Apparently, I would need to become a noble's adopted daughter so that I could go to the Royal Academy and learn about mana, about magic and the ways to use it. A noble who signed with me would need to prepare magic tools that could consume a seriously enormous amount of my mana so as to not put those around me at risk. But there were barely any nobles in the city who had magic tools that could withstand my enormous amount of mana.

"Your mana is too much for a sole noble to keep to themselves. It must be used for the sake of the duchy. For the sake of the country."

"...I'm not sure I understand."

Ever since learning that I was sick with the Devouring, I had been told that I would need to sign with a noble to calm the heat and survive. It was hard to believe I had so much mana that not even that was an option for me. It didn't feel real. It felt like it was happening to someone else, not me.

"You need to face reality, Myne. You endanger the lives of all those around you just by getting emotional. If you do not learn to control your emotions, it is likely that one day you may hurt even your precious family."

"...Th-That won't happen so long as I'm with them. The reason I got like this in the first place is because I miss them."

The problem was being kept separate from my family. As long as I was with them, I could live in peace.

"So please, don't take me away from my family," I said.

The High Priest shut his eyes tightly, knitting his eyebrows. It was clear by the look on his face that he was enduring a Myne-induced headache, which made me feel just a little guilty. I knew I was asking for the impossible from him, but I just couldn't remain stable without my family. There was no helping that. My heart wanted what it wanted.

"...Ten years old," murmured the High Priest, seeming to have selected an age out of nowhere.

I looked up at him in confusion, and the High Priest shook his head with exasperation while setting me down from his lap.

"The Royal Academy begins accepting students when they are ten years of age. That is when you must go. Until then, you may remain with your family, visiting the temple to offer up your mana as you have been. However," added the High Priest, his expression hardening to show that he was drawing a firm line, "I will not listen to your protests after that. If you are determined to be a danger to others, you will be executed, and your family along with you. None will be spared. Remember this well."

"...Okay."

It seemed that the High Priest wouldn't budge on me being

adopted once I was ten. I put a hand on my chest as the weight of having a limited amount of time left with my family hit me.

Daily Winter Life

I was finally permitted to walk through the temple as I wished, now that I had Damuel as a bodyguard. It was a bit rough on him since he had to travel here from the Noble's Quarter every day, but he used the flying horse he made from his feystone, so unlike Lutz and Tuuli the snow posed no issue to him.

Wow, magic sure is convenient.

Thanks to Damuel, I could go to the orphanage and book room again, which provided ample distraction. My family couldn't visit me as much as they could before due to all the thick snow, but I could forget how much I missed them by absorbing myself in books. Only when reading could I forget my loneliness.

The problem was that the library was incredibly cold. I couldn't stay for long no matter how much I bundled up, and neither Damuel nor Fran liked going there.

"Apprentice," said Damuel, "could you ask Lord Ferdinand if you could bring books back to your chambers, so we don't have to stay in the book room?"

"I agree with Sir Damuel's wisdom," said Fran. "You will end up sick if you go there too often."

Damuel and Fran got along surprisingly well. They often seemed to agree on things, but maybe Fran was just used to dealing with nobles. Either way, they were on good terms.

"...High Priest. For the stated reasons, may I bring books from the book room to my chambers?"

"You may borrow the books I brought myself. I would not want for you to get sick right before the Dedication Ritual, after all... Hah. I win."

The High Priest let slip a slight grin after beating me in reversi. As I expected, his level of skill was way past my own now that he understood the game. What kind of an adult was he, going all out on a little girl? Sure, I just *looked* like a little girl, but still.

"I think it's cruel that you would go all out on a child, High Priest."

"That is laughable coming from you, who went all out on a beginner. I see that you're a sore loser, hm?"

The High Priest was a little immature sometimes, but he was a

good person. He lent me his books, and when the loneliness got to be too much for me to bear, he would let me barge into his room and trade organizing paperwork or doing a lot of math for some precious hug time in the hidden room. He usually grimaced hard when I asked, but I was too caught up in my own problems to worry about his. Our arrangement was fine by me.

“Morning, Myne. How’ve you been?” asked Tuuli.

“You’re not sleeping all day, are you?” questioned Lutz.

Tuuli and Lutz came to visit me on a day that was less snowy than usual.

Tuuli was in the middle of working hard to learn her letters. She brought her children’s bible, as these were being used as textbooks in the temple school, as well as her stone slate and pen so that she could study with the other kids in the orphanage.

Lutz was literate and knew math, so he checked up on the winter handiwork, taught the kids along with the gray priests, and instructed Gil on how to write reports on the workshop’s production.

“Who’re those two, apprentice?”

“Sir Damuel, that’s my older sister Tuuli and my friend Lutz. They come here a lot when it’s not winter, so make sure you remember them.”

I introduced Damuel to Tuuli and Lutz. They looked up at him, mouths agape.

“Tuuli. Lutz. This is Sir Damuel. He’s serving as my bodyguard for now. I called him ‘sir’ because he’s from the Knight’s Order.”

“...The Knight’s Order?! Woah, that’s awesome!”

“A noble is guarding you, Myne?!”

They both looked at Damuel, sparkling with excitement and envy, which threw him off a little.

“Apprentice, what should I do at times like this?”

“Just smile, I think.”

Damuel forced a stiff smile onto his face, dealing with Tuuli and Lutz as best he could.

I later heard that Damuel, having rarely left the Noble’s Quarter in which he was raised, had barely interacted with commoners before. And while he had an older brother, he had no younger siblings and so wasn’t sure how to deal with little kids. On top of all that, his family was so low in status within noble society that nobody had ever looked at him with envy before.

“Okay, Myne. I have to go to the orphanage with Lutz,” said Tuuli, patting my arms which were wrapped around her.

I just shook my head, squeezing harder.

“I’ll go with you today. The High Priest said I can walk around the

temple now that Sir Damuel's with me, and I've been wondering how the temple school is holding up."

I had been stuck in my chambers even when Lutz and Tuuli came to see me, but now I could go to the orphanage with them. And so I did, heading to the orphanage dining hall with Rosina and Damuel in tow.

"An apprentice shrine maiden is serving as the director of the orphanage? There really is a shortage in manpower here..."

"Yes, there simply aren't enough blue priests. The High Priest has enough on his hands, and I took on this role in hopes of helping him. Though I'm really just the director in name only."

There was no need for me to explain that I had stuck my nose into temple affairs uninvited and ended up in the role after getting in way over my head. What mattered was that when something important happened in the orphanage, it was the High Priest who signed off on it. At best, I was just a bureaucratic middlewoman who managed the orphanage's daily affairs.

"You must be pretty talented if you're helping Lord Ferdinand with his work," sighed Damuel. He told me that when the High Priest had been in the Knight's Order, he was hard on those who lacked talent, giving extra work to those lagging behind the others and ultimately cutting off anyone who couldn't keep up. Some people even came to think of him as a monster.

Considering how those in the temple assigned to be his attendants either became first class at their jobs or were let go, it seemed his intense method of training was still going on today.

"But I've heard from Fran that the High Priest only sets work that he thinks the person would be capable of, albeit with a little perseverance."

"Being able to keep up with that work is proof you've got talent. He's never even given me work to do before. I don't think he even knew I existed, since I was just some laynoble apprentice back in the day."

Damuel murmured about how he wished the High Priest would give him work as well, so I decided to ask the High Priest to do so the next time I saw him. I was sure he would delight in giving someone work to do.

"Welcome, Lutz, Tuuli. Oh, and Rosina. I see Sister Myne is with you." Wilma greeted us with a smile, but then froze in place the second she saw Damuel. She looked at me with tearful eyes, trembling a little. "Sister Myne, who might this finely dressed gentleman be?"

"He's the knight serving as my bodyguard. He's very kind and serious about his work, and won't mistreat the women or kids here.

Right, Sir Damuel?"

"Of course. I swear as a knight that I mean no harm or ill will to anyone here."

Wilma only had experience with cruel blue priests and disgusting nobles who came to the orphanage seeking flowers, so she remained on guard against Damuel while inviting us inside.

"It's pretty warm here," remarked Damuel, his eyes widened in surprise.

Thanks to our efforts during the winter preparations, the furnace in the dining hall was burning brightly, warming the whole room. And everyone in the orphanage was spending their days in the dining hall, with the boys' building staying empty to save as much firewood as possible. That meant more people in one place, which naturally heated up the room even further.

"We thoroughly prepared the orphanage for winter," I explained. "This is the best place for all of them to be."

A session of the temple school was being held off in one corner, while the apprentices who had already learned their letters were working hard at winter handiwork in another corner.

"Oh, they've already started. Bye, Myne! I need to get going!" exclaimed Tuuli.

"Same here," Lutz said with a nod.

Tuuli headed toward the temple school session while Lutz went over to the handiwork corner.

I myself headed for a seat where I could see the classroom (read: table) from a far enough distance that I wouldn't be in their way.

"Apprentice, what are they doing?" Damuel pointed to the corner holding the classroom with a curious look on his face.

"That's where we're teaching the kids to read and write."

"...You're teaching orphans to read and write? But why?"

In this world, only people of relatively high status and those who worked with them learned to read and write. From their perspective, it didn't make sense to teach these skills to orphans.

However, considering that the orphans had a high chance of becoming attendants to blue priests, they were more likely to need to know how to read and write than most lower city craftsmen. And in terms of raising the literacy rate, it would be more efficient to start by teaching people who would benefit the most from reading and writing before moving on to the sons of craftsmen and so on.

"Temple orphans will one day be attendants here or otherwise servants in the Noble's Quarter, so the sooner they learn to read and do math the better. It'll help them do their job one day."

"Makes sense. That means they won't have to be trained as much when the time comes."

As I watched the gray priests working as teachers help the kids read the children's bibles, illustrating each letter on their stone slate as they appeared, I discussed the next picture book with Wilma. I showed her a script I had written by poring over the thick bible and extracting the information I needed about the subordinate gods and organizing them into separate books for each season. She fixed up the text here and there, adding some poetic descriptions where they fit.

"Apprentice, what's this?"

"A copy of the children's bible I made to help the orphans learn to read. They also help them memorize the names of the gods and divine instruments."

"Oh?"

Damuel flipped through the children's bible, looking interested.

"It covers the King and Queen of the gods, plus the Eternal Five, and now I'm planning to make ones that cover the subordinate gods. Their names are important for blessings."

"These sure are convenient. I had a rough time memorizing the names myself."

Damuel sighed about how many names one needed to know to properly use magic. If he had that much trouble, then it was a safe bet that a simple picture dictionary of the gods would go over well with nobles. I smiled to myself, mentally calculating the profit waiting for me now that I had a noble's endorsement.

"Want to play karuta with us, Wilma?" asked an orphan.

"Certainly. Sister Myne, would you like to join?"

It seemed that it was standard procedure to play karuta after studying their textbooks, as the karuta cards were already laid out on the floor. Tuuli was staring at some of them with her face scrunched up.

"Tuuli, might something be bothering you, by chance?"

While outside of my chambers, I maintained my rich-girl manner of speaking even when talking to Lutz and Tuuli. I had been instructed to do so by Fran and Rosina, so despite how unnatural it felt, I forced myself to be extremely formal with Tuuli.

She frowned a bit, then whispered in a quiet, embarrassed voice. "...The thing is, I'm the worst at karuta. Out of everyone."

The kids in the orphanage had been playing karuta together ever since I gave a set to Gil, so even if they didn't know the letters, they had the art memorized.

Tuuli, on the other hand, didn't know her letters very well yet, and it was hard for her to get used to all the religious symbolism. She was on an entirely different playing field from the orphanage kids—they played every day, whereas she could only come and play when

the snow wasn't so bad.

"Practice is important, and all you can do is try until you master it. Might I suggest focusing on just the gods within the textbook?"

Wilma had drawn the art for both the karuta and the textbook, and both were focused on the exact same subjects. If she couldn't win at karuta until she had memorized them all, she might as well start by focusing on the ones she had mostly memorized already to give her a head start.

"I'll do my best."

I tried my hand at karuta too, but the kids were as good as you'd expect; it was hardly even a competition. Also, some of the apprentices were close to coming of age, and if you asked me, it wasn't fair that their arms were so much longer than mine.

Noon passed, and it was time for Tuuli's sewing class. It consisted mainly of girls, and she taught them how to make simple repairs.

She had taught the class enough times that she had already learned how to be a good teacher. The orphans could repair their frayed sleeves, and although they were still wearing second-hand clothing, it all looked a lot better than it did before.

"Oh, Gil. Where are you off to in such thick clothes?"

I could see a crowd of boys centered around Gil, all of them wearing thick clothing. There may not have been a blizzard outside, but it was still snowing a little.

"Lutz told us to get the workshop ready for parue gathering."

It was customary to go parue gathering on clear winter days. Preparing to leave so early in the morning was a challenge, so it seemed they were being proactive and getting things ready ahead of time.

"In that case, prepare well so that you may gather many parues."

"Yeah!"

Naturally, it was the first time any of the children were going parue gathering. That said, with so many kids on the loose that they were sure to get a lot of them. I was looking forward to seeing just how many they would get.

After I watched the boys run off to the workshop to prepare, I heard Tuuli let out a big sigh. "We won't get many parues this year, since Mom can't go."

I was out of the equation, as always; Mom was too pregnant to climb any trees; and Dad worked enough days of the week that there was no guarantee he'd be available. Tuuli was all on her own, and she had a feeling there wouldn't be any sweets waiting for her this winter.

"Tuuli, were you not going to accompany the orphanage children? I had anticipated giving you our family's share of parues as thanks."

It would be a bit much to expect Lutz to lead all the kids by himself. My plan was for Tuuli to help, with her payment being our family's share of parues.

"That sounds great!" Tuuli exclaimed, her eyes glistening. "Whew. I was sure I'd have to last the whole winter without any parue cakes."

It had become tradition in our home to get juice from parues, remove the oil, and bake parue cakes from the leftovers. I intended to do the same in the orphanage this year, which was why I had bought large metal pans.

"What are parues, apprentice?" Damuel looked curious, having no idea what we were talking about. It seemed that nobles didn't go parue hunting.

The thought of a noble trying to climb a tree made me smile. Their droopy sleeves would totally get in the way.

"They are fruit that can only be picked from trees in the morning of clear winter days. Their sweetness is renowned in the lower city."

"Sister Myne, are parues really that sweet?"

The kids who had been surrounding Wilma heard the magic word "sweet" and gathered around me, eyes shining with anticipation. There were so many mouths to feed in the orphanage that they rarely got to eat anything sweet, so the thought of sweet parues was practically making them drool.

"Oh yes, they are quite sweet indeed. I am ever so fond of them."

"Wow, I can't wait!"

"Take us too, Tuuli!"

The kids pressed forward, wanting to go with Lutz and Tuuli.

She smiled at all of them. "Uh huh, we can all go together. But we have to go to the forest super early, so you'll need to wake up really early too! Can you do that?"

"We can do it!"

And so, after several days of heated anticipation, the weather finally cleared up. Dazzling sunlight rained down from the start of morning, reflecting off the snow and filling the world with a gleaming brightness that I could see even through the curtains of my bed.

I jumped out of bed before Delia could come get me, ran to the staircase and leaned over the railing to shout down to the first floor.

"Gil! Gil! It's parue-gathering day! Go tell the kids in the orphanage! Hurry! Get ready!"

Gil, who had already woken up and gotten dressed, shouted back "Got it!" and dashed out of his room. Delia dashed out of her room too, grabbing my arm with a furious look on her face.

"Sister Myne! Please stay in bed until I come wake you up! And you shouldn't lean over the railing in your bed clothes like that! Geez!"

How many times do I have to tell you all this?!"

"Delia, today is parue-gathering day. Lutz and Tuuli will be here really soon. I have to go get changed right away."

People in the lower city would be rushing to get ready before the gates opened at second bell; Lutz and Tuuli would be here soon, no doubt about it. But telling Delia that just made her eyes narrow and her voice sharpen.

"That is not part of your schedule!"

"Clear days in the blizzard are dependent on the whims of Ewigeliebe the God of Life. Nobody can schedule for them."

I hurriedly had Delia change my clothes so I could wait for Tuuli and Lutz. Breakfast could wait until I had seen them off. Fran, seeing how jittery I was, started preparing for visitors.

My prediction was right on the money, and Tuuli came running over when I would normally be eating breakfast. I could see Dad behind her.

"Morning, Myne! Dad's coming with us, he has today off."

"Dad, it's so good to see you!"

The moment I saw Dad walk into the hall, I ran over and jumped into his arms. He caught me and lifted me up until we were face to face. I rubbed his beard with my hands.

"Looks like you're doing good, Myne. Caught any fevers lately?"

"None at all. Fran takes me to bed right away when I start feeling sick, and whenever I actually do get stuck in bed, they make me drink a super gross potion. I don't even have the time to get fevers."

"That's what I like to hear."

Dad grinned at me, and while I told him how things had been lately, Tuuli took out a jar from her pocket.

"Myne, you mentioned that you ran out of this, right?"

Dad set me down so I could look at the jar. It was the one I had put natural yeast inside. Tuuli had looked after it while I was away from home.

I hugged the slightly warm jar close to me. "Thanks, Tuuli."

"We just dropped by to give you that and say hi before going parue gathering. Lutz is already at the orphanage!"

"Okay. Be sure to find lots of them! I'll be waiting with lots of fluffy bread at lunch."

I saw the two of them off, then put a hand on my smiling cheek. Even just a little bit of time with my family warmed my heart. And now it was time to prepare for juicing parues and making parue cakes.

"Fran, could you deliver this to Ella? And inform her that I will be eating lunch with Tuuli, Lutz, and Dad. I want her to make fluffy bread for me."

"Understood."

Once Fran had the yeast, I turned to Rosina.

“Rosina, once we’ve finished harspiel practice, go to Wilma’s and tell her to start preparing for the parue cakes.”

“As you wish.”

I practiced harspiel until third bell, then went to help the High Priest. He told me I looked unnaturally happy to the point of being off-putting, and I responded by saying that indeed I was, before getting to work. Just thinking about spending lunch with Tuuli, Lutz, and Dad once they got back was enough to make me radiate joy.

Fourth bell rang in no time, signifying noon. Damuel saw me to my chambers, then went right back to the High Priest’s room.

“I’ll be eating lunch now. Be sure not to leave your room while I’m gone.”

“Understood, Sir Damuel.”

Damuel ate lunch in the High Priest’s room, since my chambers’ kitchen didn’t have enough food to cater for the grown man who had been so suddenly thrown into the mix.

Ella sent word that lunch was ready, and I waited for everyone while wiggling excitedly in my seat.

“We’re back, Myne! And we got lots of them!”

“Yes!”

The three of them came back with big, satisfied grins. Human wave tactics were as effective for gathering parues as I had expected, and they really had found a ton of them. We chewed on the fluffy bread made from the yeast Tuuli had brought me while talking about what our afternoon plans were.

“Myne, we’ll be juicing them later, but where should we do that? The workshop? Or the dining hall?” Lutz asked.

“We can juice them in the dining hall just fine, but I think it’d be faster to get the oil out using the presses in the workshop?”

The workshop had presses meant for getting water out of paper, and with Dad and the gray priests helping, we wouldn’t need to squash the parues with hammers before getting the oil out. But my suggestion made Lutz hesitate.

“Parues are pretty hard when they’re cold, so I get the feeling just using hammers in the warm dining hall will work out better.”

“Yeah, with that many people we might as well do it all in the dining hall, if we’ve got the hammers for it.”

At Lutz and Dad’s suggestion, we decided to do it all in the dining hall. Tuuli, more concerned about what came after juicing the parues, looked at me eagerly.

“Where are we going to bake the parue cakes? In the basement of the girls’ building? Or the workshop?”

“I was planning on using the basement. If Ella learned about them and spread the recipe through the city, everyone feeding their animals with parue leftovers would be in trouble, right?”

“Yeah, definitely.” Lutz scrunched up his face, thinking of his chickens.

Parue leftovers were perfect for feeding animals over the winter. If people started cooking with them instead of giving them away basically for free, everyone raising animals would be in big trouble. It’d be better if we just enjoyed the parue cakes by ourselves; the secret should be safe if we made them in the orphanage basement.

“Let’s divide up our shares of the parues and get them all ready in the dining hall, then.”

“Okay!” exclaimed Tuuli. “I’ll teach all the girls how to make parue cakes.”

Once we finished lunch, the three of them hurried to the orphanage to begin their work. I had to wait for Damuel to get back before I could go with them.

As usual, Delia was the only one who stayed behind in my chambers, since she didn’t want to go to the orphanage.

“Apprentice, what in the world is going on here?”

Damuel stiffened after looking around the orphanage. In one corner there were kids poking holes into fruit and pouring the white juice inside into cups, while in another several gray priests were violently crushing the juiced fruits with hammers. To someone not familiar with parues, it certainly was a bizarre sight.

“We’re getting the fruit juice out of parues, and hammering the juiced fruit over there to get the oil out. The leftovers at the end make delightful sweets and I’m sure the girls are hard at work cooking them in the basement.”

Tuuli’s lesson must have been going well, judging by the sweet, fluffy scent wafting up from the basement. They should be making buttered parue cakes, mixing the goat milk and eggs I had asked Wilma to get that morning with parue juice. I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply, filling my nose with a sweet scent.

Not long after I asked Rosina and Fran to prepare plates, Tuuli came walking up the stairs with a parue cake-stacked plate.

“Oh, you’re already here? Perfect. We’re already cooking lots of them.”

Behind Tuuli was another apprentice, carrying a plate likewise stacked with parue cakes. They both set their plates in front of me.

“You keep watch, Myne. Make sure nobody grabs any before they’re all done,” said Tuuli, and I nodded with a smile.

There was nobody in the orphanage who would risk taking food from an apprentice blue shrine maiden without permission. At the

very least, they knew they wouldn't get to eat any more after the first one.

"Wow, it smells so nice!"

"I wanna have one!"

A few of the kids who had been juicing the parues rushed over after smelling the parue cakes.

"No eating until all the work is done. Remember: Those who don't work, don't eat."

My reminder sent the kids hurrying back to their workplaces, and amid their footsteps I heard a hard swallow come from behind me. I turned around on instinct and saw Damuel staring at the parue cakes.

"What are those, apprentice...?"

It was written on his face that he wanted to eat one. I would have thought that, as a noble, he had sugar and could eat sweets with some regularity, so I could only guess that he was just interested in trying something new.

"Parue cakes, made from parues. This must be your first time seeing them if you haven't had parues before. Would you like to eat them with us?"

"Ahem! Well. I am a little interested in what people eat here, given that I'll be coming here fairly often from now on."

Once all the parues were finished, the girls and children brought the juice, oil, and leftovers to the basement while the boys took the tools they had used back to the boys' building. Fran and Rosina split up the parue cakes and began distributing them to the kids, who were lined up with plates in hand. I asked Gil to give a parue cake to Delia, and set aside plates for the kids who had been helping Ella in my chambers' kitchen.

Everyone was sitting in the dining hall with plates in front of them; Fran had set plates and silverware taken from my chambers in front of me and Damuel.

"Now, let us pray."

At my words, the children all crossed their arms in front of their chests and began their pre-meal prayer.

"O mighty King and Queen of the endless skies who doth grace us with thousands upon thousands of lives to consume, O mighty Eternal Five who rule the mortal realm, I offer thanks and prayers to thee, and do partake in the meal so graciously provided."

Dad and Tuuli listened to the smoothly said prayer with dazed looks on their faces. It was the same prayer I had memorized myself. I glanced at Damuel and saw that he too was stating the prayer without any hesitation. It seemed that nobles had to say the same prayers.

After finishing the prayer, the kids began shoving the parue cakes

into their mouths like it was a race. I took a bite myself while watching on.

“Wow! So good!”

“So sweet!”

The children let out cries of joy as they tucked into the delicious treat, but Damuel instead froze beside me. He swallowed, his eyes wide open.

“Apprentice, does everyone in the lower city eat these?”

“They do not. This is a special treat, just for us. Do you like it?” I asked.

Damuel let out a slow sigh. “It’s way too good. Is it just me, or are the kids here living like nobles? They’re eating sweets like these and learning to read and write...”

“This is an orphanage; I imagine they live nothing like nobles. They gathered these parues themselves from a snowy forest early in the morning. They can only be gathered on the morning of sunny winter days, and they aren’t sold anywhere.”

Damuel continued eating his parue cake with a stunned look on his face, and from then on he always made a point to go to the orphanage on sunny winter days. It seemed that he quite liked parue cakes.

And he wasn’t the only one; everyone in the orphanage loved them.

“Sister Myne, these are delicious.”

“When will the next sunny day come?”

“There are still plenty of parue leftovers,” I replied, “so we can make more later. And the leftovers can be used for other recipes too, so please look forward to those.”

As a result of me teaching Wilma and the other orphanage cooks the parue cake recipe I had taught Lutz’s family, the battle for parues in the orphanage became more intense than ever.

The Dedication Ritual

I was playing a game of reversi with the High Priest (who had finished his paperwork faster than usual) when, all of a sudden, he held the sound-blocking magic tool out toward me. I reached out and grabbed onto it just as he placed down a black piece.

“Myne, the Dedication Ritual will begin next Earthday.”

“Okay.”

I stared intently at the black piece he had just put down, thinking over my next move, when suddenly he let out a quiet murmur.

“...Do a poor job,” he said, and I looked up at him in confusion, not immediately understanding what he meant. He warned me to look back down, so as to not show my dumbfounded expression to the world, then explained.

“Take care not to offer too much mana at once. I have told the High Bishop that you expend twelve small stones worth of mana during your daily offerings and have seven to eight stones worth of mana left after that. He will infer from this that you would pass out if you attempted to offer more than twenty stones, no matter how hard you tried. In reality you are capable of much more than that, but...” He trailed off, reaching for another of the tiny wooden squares with one side painted black that we were using as reversi stones. His eyes never moved from the game board.

“If you carelessly show him the full extent of your mana, he will likely take it poorly and begin claiming that we deceived him or that we were hiding your worth from him. That is why it would be to all of our benefit if you limit yourself to filling no more than twenty stones on each day of the Dedication Ritual, and preferably you will pretend to look a little sick when leaving.”

“I don’t mind that, but then wouldn’t we *actually* be deceiving him?”

It wouldn’t be hard for me to restrain my mana, but that would make the High Bishop’s misinterpretation that we were deceiving him a reality. However, my observation just made the High Priest grin slightly.

“It would not be a misinterpretation if we truly were deceiving him, no? I hate when people misunderstand me, but if we did in fact deceive him, I can counter his claims with a simple ‘Indeed we did.’ Furthermore, it will be more convenient for us in the future if you

continue to hide the full extent of your power. There is no need for us to foolishly give him information he does not need to have. When you have opponents to beat, it is wise to hide tricks—and in this case, power—up your sleeve.”

“I see...”

Although I understood his point, I couldn’t help but picture a scene where the High Bishop says “You deceived me!” only for the High Priest to reply “Indeed we did.”

...Yeah, the High Priest definitely looks like the villain here.

The Dedication Ritual began that Earthday. Delia got me in the bath early in the morning and cleansed my body. Then, she put my new ceremonial robes on me. The blue robes had waves and flowers sewn into them with thread of the same blue color, fringed with gold and held together with a silver sash around the waist. The other smaller decorations were done using red, the divine color of winter; it was the color of the hope-giving hearth that weakened the cold.

“Delia, I would like to use my new hair stick today.”

I stopped Delia from getting a hair stick from the closet, instead taking a small bundle of cloth Tuuli had delivered just a few days ago out from my desk drawer and handing it to her.

“Geez! You can’t just put hair sticks in your drawer like that! What would you do if the flowers got all crumpled up?!”

Delia shook her head as she delicately unwrapped the hair stick. It used red and green thread to fit the winter and spring rituals, but the design itself was largely similar to the one I had worn at my baptism ceremony; there were three large red roses and a string of several tiny green leaves hanging from it, similar to how I had used the small white flowers.

My family had made this new ceremonial hair stick for me after seeing how sad I was at my other hair stick getting destroyed during the mission I went on with the Knight’s Order. It would be perfect for staving off a lonely winter in the temple.

“This hair stick certainly does look good on you, but I believe the other one better complemented your hair color, Sister Myne.” Rosina, watching from a short distance away, spoke with a trace of regret after I finished bundling my hair up with the new stick.

“Sadly, there’s nothing I can do about that. I asked them to use royal colors that would go with the upcoming winter and spring ceremonies, and I can’t help that those colors don’t go well with my hair.”

After finishing my hair, I waited for Damuel to arrive. Then, together, we headed to the High Priest’s room.

My chambers were the only ones this far away from the nobles' section of the temple, which made it especially arduous for the High Priest's attendants to summon me. To save time, he asked me to just wait in his room before the ceremony. My robes, made of the highest quality cloth out there, were both warm and light, making a pleasant swishing sound as I walked down the halls.

"Those robes sure look like they were worth the insane price," said Damuel, a hint of awe in his voice as he looked over my ceremonial robes, no doubt remembering how much he had spent to cover just one quarter of their price.

Unlike the first set, for which I already had the required cloth on hand, the second set had been made from scratch—and with an excessive expedite fee at that. I had furtively asked Damuel how much he had paid and it turned out that, overall, these robes cost more than three times as much as the ones I had bought originally.

Damuel was a laynoble of a family that could hardly be described as wealthy, even by commoner standards, and had apparently fallen ill when he first heard how much he would need to pay. He had to ask his family for help, and ultimately it was the family of his older brother's mistress who ended up lending him money to cover most of the cost.

"You paid for the first set of robes yourself, didn't you, apprentice? I'm impressed you had that much money lying around."

"They made the robes out of cloth I had been gifted, so it wasn't as expensive as it could have been."

"That does make sense, but still."

Our discussion ended as we arrived at the High Priest's room. The man himself was absent due to the ritual, but he had left behind some attendants to take care of me.

"Good morning, Sister Myne. As soon as the other blue priests have finished performing the ritual, Arno will be sent for you. Please wait here until then."

I was forbidden from eating or drinking until the ritual was done, so all I could do was wait. I sat in the seat offered to me as Fran and Damuel stood themselves behind me. It felt awkward to have a noble like Damuel stand while I was seated, so I turned around and looked up at him.

"You don't want to sit, Sir Damuel?"

"Apprentice, a seated bodyguard would be unable to act quickly when it mattered most. An emergency could happen at any moment." His tone made it clear he wasn't going to budge an inch, which meant that I had no choice but to remain seated, no matter how uncomfortable it felt.

I waited quietly in the High Priest's room, and eventually Arno

did indeed come for me.

“Sister Myne, please follow me immediately,” he called.

I stood up to follow him out, Fran and Damuel close behind. We exited the High Priest’s room, passing by several doors and finally the High Bishop’s room before turning a corner. Arno walked briskly, unlike my attendants who always slowed down to match my pace.

Fran, seeing how much I was struggling to keep up, spoke to Arno.

“Arno, my apologies, but can I request that you slow down?”

“Oh, I see I was walking a little too fast for Sister Myne,” he said, slowing down. “Forgive me.”

As we continued, the door at the end of the hallway we were going down was slowly opened by a gray priest. Judging by the fact he was looking inside the room as he did so, he likely wasn’t opening it to match my arrival—he was opening it to let those inside come out.

The first person to step out was a sizable man wearing white robes secured with a golden sash. I had seen those robes at my baptism and he was the only one in the temple who wore them, so I recognized him in an instant.

“...The High Bishop.” I murmured his title without really thinking about it. He had mostly faded from my mind as I hadn’t seen him at all since joining the temple, but it seemed that he still viewed me as an enemy; his expression darkened with hate the second he saw me, and he walked toward us with a clear grimace on his face.

Our timing couldn’t have been worse—his room was behind us and he would be going there now. If we had been just a little later, he would have already been back in his room and both of us could have avoided this unpleasant encounter.

I moved aside and knelt down, my arms crossed over my chest. Arno, Fran, and Damuel did the same. I could hear the High Bishop’s footsteps and the rustling of his robes growing nearer and nearer. The fact that I knew he hated me just made me more nervous about what he might do, and my heart pounded as I silently waited for him to pass by.

As I focused my eyes on the ground in front of me, I saw his white robes swish past. He let out an arrogant snort, but that was all; he kept moving without stopping to do anything else. I continued to kneel, keeping my face down until I eventually heard his door shut, at which point I sighed in relief and stood up.

Arno resumed his guidance, gesturing me through the still-open door to the ritual chamber.

“Sir Damuel, please wait here. Only priests and shrine maidens are allowed into the ritual chamber,” said Arno. I turned around on instinct, but Arno simply urged me onward, saying that the High Priest was waiting inside.

And indeed he was correct—the moment I stepped forward, I saw the High Priest standing alone in front of an altar. Nobody else was there.

The ritual chamber was like a small chapel. It had a somewhat higher ceiling than the High Priest's room and was pretty lengthy overall. The walls were pure white—aside from the gold-plated decorations that were displayed at regular intervals—and were lined by white pillars that had elaborate gold reliefs carved into their tops just like the ones in the temple's chapel. Tall windows were lined up between each pillar, and fires blazed inside of metal standing torches.

The wall at the far end of the room was covered from top to bottom with a mosaic of vivid colors and striking designs. In front of said mosaic was the multi-leveled altar, which had one burning torch on either side. A red, carpet-like cloth was rolled down the middle of the room, stretching all the way up to and over the altar. On that cloth-draped altar were the divine instruments, though there were no statues of the gods in sight.

The highest level of the altar was for the King and Queen gods, with the Goddess of Light's crown resting next to the God of Darkness's cape. The level beneath had a large golden chalice placed in the center with several smaller chalices on either side—these small chalices had been taken from the farming towns by the blue priests during the Harvest Festival and brought back here, where they would be filled during the Dedication Ritual before being returned during the Spring Prayer once winter ended. And the level beneath that one had the divine staff, spear, shield, and sword.

The bottom level had various offerings for the gods. There were plants that represented the rebirth of spring, fruits to celebrate a bountiful harvest, incense that encouraged peace, and cloth that symbolized their continued faith.

"You're here sooner than I expected, Myne."

The High Priest turned around. He was wearing his own ceremonial robes, which looked entirely different from the ones he usually wore. They were blue as well, but plenty of small leaves had been embroidered into the cloth. The decorations had been done in red, the divine color of winter, and he wore the golden sash of an adult.

"I see there aren't any blue priests here," I observed.

"We simply have too much mana for them to be here," answered the High Priest, which led me to conclude that their pride would be too hurt if they saw just how much more mana a commoner they mocked as lowborn could offer than them. Though I couldn't imagine that meeting them would be particularly pleasant for me either, so I didn't mind their absence.

“This is not only to protect their pride, though,” said the High Priest, as if reading my thoughts. I looked up in surprise as he continued. “When people gather with the same purpose and chant the same prayers, allowing their mana to flow together, this speeds up the flow of all mana in the vicinity. It becomes easier for the mana to leave the body. If the blue priests became caught up in the amount of mana you release, they would be swept away by the flow and potentially find themselves in life-threatening danger.”

“...Oh, I see.”

“I am the only one in the temple who can keep up with you. Let us begin.”

The High Priest knelt before the altar, placing both hands on the red cloth stretched along the floor. I knelt one step behind him and lowered my head, my hands on the cloth as well.

The Dedication Ritual was the most important ritual that the temple performed. It was where we priests and shrine maidens filled the divine instruments related to farming with mana to be used for the next year's harvest. The red cloth strewn across the floor and over the altar was made from thread imbued with mana, so you could make mana flow into the divine instruments just by praying with your hands against it.

“I am one who offers prayer and gratitude to the gods who have created the world.” The High Priest's low, deliberate voice echoed throughout the ritual chamber, and I repeated the prayer after him.

“O mighty King and Queen of the endless skies, O mighty Eternal Five who rule the mortal realm, O Goddess of Water Flutrane, O God of Fire Leidenschaft, O Goddess of Wind Schutzaria, O Goddess of Earth Geduldh, O God of Life Ewigeliebe. We honor you who have blessed all beings with life, and pray that we may be blessed further with your divine might.”

As I spoke the prayer, I could feel the mana flowing out of my body. The red cloth shone brightly, and through the waves of light, I could see my mana reaching the altar.

“Myne, that is enough,” said the High Priest, gracefully removing his hands from the carpet. I did the same, cutting off the flow of mana before watching intently as its last sparkles were sucked into a small chalice.

“That should be all for today,” said the High Priest while looking at the small chalices. “More mana flowed than I expected.” We had filled seven today, and some simple math led me to conclude that it would therefore take eight days to finish filling all of them.

“If not for you, I would have to fill all of these myself. Despite the fact that I also have my duties in the Noble's Quarter...” The High

Priest let out an exhausted sigh, which was rare for him.

I looked at the small chalices lined up on the altar and nodded to myself.

Now I see why the High Priest was so kind to me from the start. Anyone would get fed up having to fill all these by themselves. I was wondering why he always donated so little mana during our normal offerings, and now I see it's because he has work in the Noble's Quarter that I don't. That must be rough.

Thus, I began performing the Dedication Ritual once a day. I offered up my mana with the High Priest each time, never once seeing the other blue priests. This continued for about a week, and just before we finished off the last few chalices, the High Priest brought in about ten new ones.

"Myne, the ritual has been extended. Can I ask for your continued help?"

"What happened?" I asked, and was told that the neighboring duchy—which was experiencing an even worse mana shortage than we were—had asked for our help filling chalices, if we had the mana to spare.

"This is a good opportunity to earn political favors and gain power over them. It would be wise to accept, despite the extra burden."

"...Umm. Aren't we already on good terms with them, though?"

"Yes, we are, which is exactly why it is important to maintain our power by regularly assisting them. A good relationship means nothing if we are not the ones holding the power."

...The world of politics sure is scary.

Still, considering what one would need to do to protect their own duchy while maintaining good relationships with other duchies, my own conception of friendship simply didn't apply. Two duchies being on good terms meant something entirely different from two people being on good terms. I could understand that, but it was still hard for me to get used to.

Regardless of politics though, I didn't mind offering my help when the archduke asked me to. I had an excess of mana I wasn't using anyway, and I had no feystones or magic tools of my own to use.

"I am one who offers prayer and gratitude to the gods who have created the world."

The High Priest and I poured mana into the small chalices we were given. That was until, midway through, we were interrupted by the slow creak of the chamber door opening.

"Praying quite passionately, I see."

The High Priest quickly stood up and turned around in front of

me, so I did as well. There I saw the High Bishop entering the ritual chamber, despite never having done so before. He took his time walking up to the altar, a bag of something in his arms.

“Has something happened, High Bishop?” asked the High Priest. He received no reply as the High Bishop silently began taking small chalices out from his bag, placing them one by one on the altar. Once he had lined up about ten of them, he turned around, wearing a kindly smile just like the one he had worn before learning that I was a commoner.

“Now then, little Myne. Fill these with mana as well. The archduke himself has asked for this to be done.”

“I have heard of no such thing.” The High Priest gave the High Bishop a dubious look. The light in the High Bishop’s eyes sharpened, but his friendly smile didn’t falter for a moment.

“I have made no request of you. I am asking Myne to fulfill this duty. Do not tell me that she will obey the orders of you, the High Priest, but not I, the High Bishop.”

I could refuse or accept his request, but I was making so many enemies just by existing that it wasn’t hard to see that disobeying a direct order from the High Bishop would be unwise. He could probably make my life miserable.

Ultimately, I glanced back at the High Priest to leave the decision to him. He seemed to understand why I had looked at him, and with a somewhat hard expression, gave a slow nod.

“We have just finished today’s ritual. With your permission, we can fill them tomorrow.”

“Do not forget those words.” The High Bishop gave a broad, nasty smile, then left the ritual chamber at the same slow pace as before. A gray priest shut the door behind him, and once silence fell again, the High Priest let out a sigh of relief.

“I was terrified of you losing your temper again. Regardless, it is clear that the archduke has no hand in these additional chalices.”

“Are we still going to fill them, then? I don’t mind scoring some free points every now and again, so...”

The High Priest fell into thought for a moment before answering, a frown on his face.

“We will continue the ritual as we have. I will question the archduke about this and investigate the matter myself, but the snow will no doubt delay these efforts. Feigning obedience for now will be most convenient. Can I ask for your help yet again?”

“Of course.”

And so, I spent yet more of my winter filling up small chalices which seemed to grow slowly in number over time.

Rosina's Coming of Age Ceremony

Winter was approaching its midpoint, and I was walking back to my chambers after completing the Dedication Ritual for the day.

"Sister Myne, what will we do for the coming of age ceremony?" Fran suddenly asked. I blinked in surprise, not entirely sure what he was getting at.

"Coming of age ceremony? But I only just recently had my baptism."

"Not yours, Sister Myne. Rosina's." Fran, with a hand over his mouth to hold back a burst of laughter, clarified what he meant. That surprised me too; my jaw dropped and my eyes widened.

"...Rosina's... coming of age ceremony?"

"Yes. Rosina will come of age toward the end of winter."

"I-I had no idea..." I couldn't hide my disappointment in myself for being such a bad master that I didn't even know such basic facts about my attendants.

"Gray shrine maidens are given clothes to wear by the temple upon coming of age. That is all apprentices within the orphanage get, but it is not uncommon for attendants serving a blue robe to be given a gift by their master."

Fran explained how the coming of age ceremony worked within the orphanage. Those coming of age would bathe early in the morning, put on their newly given clothes, and then finally offer their prayers and gratitude in the chapel. This would all be before the lower city's coming of age ceremony began at third bell. In other words, the baptism and coming of age ceremonies for those in the orphanage had been finishing while I was in my room practicing the harspiel.

"I-I haven't said a single word of celebration to any of the kids in the orphanage..."

Was that really acceptable for the orphanage director? I had been pretty busy since coming to the temple, but I felt like that was a bad excuse. The blood drained from my face, which earned me a chuckle from Fran.

"As an apprentice, you are generally not allowed to participate in temple ceremonies. It is not your fault that you were unaware of this. You were bedridden during summer's coming of age ceremony and fall's baptism ceremony, and we were all busy with winter preparations during fall's coming of age ceremony. Furthermore, it

would introduce inequality if you were to begin celebrating for some despite others having received no such celebration.”

Everything in the orphanage was generally kept as equal as possible, so Fran often warned against anything that might introduce inequality. But even if I couldn’t give the orphans gifts, I at least wanted to offer them some words of celebration.

“Sister Myne, please do not think of giving gifts to the orphans,” Fran reiterated. “That will only introduce problems in the long term.”

I could see where he was coming from. I might choose to give gifts during my tenure as orphanage director, but there was no guarantee that my successor would. And now that it was set in stone that I would be going to the Royal Academy when I turned ten, I wouldn’t be staying here as orphanage director for very long. Fran wanted me to think about the long-term implications of my actions.

“I would like to note that I mentioned blue robes giving gifts to their attendants because you are the kind of person who gives her attendants gifts regularly without prompting, Sister Myne. It is not something that one has to do.”

I hadn’t noticed myself, but it seemed that Fran had gone out of his way to inform me of Rosina’s coming of age ceremony because he assumed that I would want to give her a present. And he was right. I didn’t even know which seasons my attendants had been born in. I knew that Rosina was close to coming of age, but I didn’t know when her ceremony was.

“Thank you for telling me, Fran. I will think about what to give Rosina. But first... may I ask what the High Priest gave you after your coming of age ceremony?”

“A pen and ink. I have used that pen to this very day. I recall being quite happy, for I felt that he was accepting me as an adult.” Fran broke into a warm smile as he spoke. I could guess that he had told me about Rosina’s coming of age ceremony specifically because his own was such a happy memory for him.

As her master, I needed to think of a gift that would make Rosina happy. But I was often wrong in my guesses for what people would like, so it was absolutely essential that I investigate what kind of presents were normal for coming of age ceremonies. First, I would ask those close to me what they knew. Lutz was an obvious place to start, but I wouldn’t be able to see him until the blizzard stopped. And the only one close to me in the temple, aside from my attendants, was the High Priest. Which meant...

“High Priest, one of my attendants is about to come of age. What would be a normal gift for me to give her?” I asked once we’d finished our work for the day. He looked at me with slightly wide eyes,

murmured the quite rude comment “That is a rare sensible question from you,” then cleared his throat.

“The best gift is one that the recipient will use for a long time, as this is a ceremony to celebrate them coming of age. A standard gift, then, is one they will use at work. I give each of my attendants a pen and ink.”

“Something Rosina will use often and for work... Well, that just leaves an instrument,” I thought aloud, earning me a cold glare from the High Priest.

“Fool. Who would ever give an expensive instrument to their attendant when they do not even own one themselves? Buy one for yourself before thinking of gifting one to your attendant,” he said with a tinge of annoyance. That called for a tactical retreat.

“You’re right. Thank you for your thoughts. I’ll try and think of something else.”

Days after the High Priest had lectured me, the blizzard finally weakened. Tuuli, Lutz, and Benno all came to my chambers together.

“Are you doing okay, Myne?” asked Tuuli.

“Tuuli, Lutz! Oh, and Benno.”

“I’m going to go study in the orphanage, but these two wanted to talk about something.”

Tuuli went off right after saying hello, but Lutz and Benno came into my chambers. Benno straightened the second he noticed Damuel inside.

“Sister Myne, I humbly request that you allow a leherl to be trained as a waiter under your care.”

Benno wanted me to train a leherl named Leon in my chambers. I glanced at Fran, who would be the one potentially training him.

“Fran, do you think it would be acceptable for me to agree to this?”

“As I have recently become able to entrust work to Rosina and Wilma, I do have the time to teach *specifically* the art of waiting during lunch time,” he replied. I noticed that his expression was just a little more stiff than usual, and kept that in mind as I looked back at Benno.

“Very well. Benno, we will teach him only how to be a waiter, so please be sure to send someone who has been fully trained.”

“Fully trained?” Benno gave me a curious look. His employees were trained thoroughly so that they would be equipped to handle rich customers—Lutz and I had learned that well while visiting his store. We were treated as guests of honor while being taken to his office, and since Benno respected our business, nobody ever treated us with disdain. It made sense that Benno would expect any of his

employees to be well-trained enough to learn here.

“Fran will be teaching your employee, but he is a gray priest and an orphan. We firmly refuse to deal with anyone so untrained as to scorn or look down on him.”

I had heard from Fran that while all of Benno’s employees were polite to customers, only about half of them were polite to servants. There were some in the store who gave Fran nasty looks while he waited for me to finish talking to Benno in the back office.

“Oh, so you mean to say that such untrained individuals are in my store. My apologies, it seems that my training has been insufficient after all. If Leon is by chance one such untrained individual, please inform me at once so that I may cancel his leherl contract immediately.”

“Fran, do you have any other requests, or will that be all?”

“Well... I do not mind teaching Leon to be a waiter, but we will not provide food for him. The food here is made for Sister Myne.”

“Worry not, I will cover his food just as I am covering Lutz’s.”

Benno and Fran began discussing the details of the agreement, so I beckoned Lutz over and started whispering.

“Lutz, there’s something I want to talk about.”

“What? You got another crazy plot up your sleeve?” A trace of caution arose on Lutz’s face, and both Fran and Benno stopped their discussion to look our way after hearing him.

“Crazy plot? That’s so mean, Lutz. I’m talking about Rosina’s coming of age ceremony. Do you know what kind of gifts are usually given after those? Zasha must be coming of age soon.”

“My parents’ll probably give him tools for work. The ones they gave him after his baptism were small ones for kids.”

The tools given to children after their baptism were generally lighter so that they could carry them, or just smaller in general. But that made it hard to keep using them as the children grew older. Some bought new ones before growing up and others received larger hand-me-downs, but otherwise they were given brand new work tools when they came of age.

“Tools for craftsmen. Okay... Benno, what gifts do merchants usually give after coming of age ceremonies?”

“I give accessories to my family and clothing to my leherls. Both are necessary for being presentable to nobles.”

“Don’t you give anything to your lehanges?”

“I do not.”

Leherls were essential to the future of the store and would be brought to meetings once they came of age, but most lehanges left once their final contract was up, so there was no need to give them any celebratory gifts.

“Accessories and clothes are fine, but... I don’t feel like Rosina would use either very much.”

“But she’s gonna start pinning her hair up, right? Maybe get her a comb or a ribbon or something,” suggested Lutz.

Maybe a nicely decorated hairpin would be a good present for her. I wrote that down on my diptych.

“If you need a hairpin for a gift, please feel free to order one through Lutz.”

“Thank you for your thoughts.”

Benno returned to his store after finishing his discussion with Fran. I accompanied Lutz to the orphanage, Fran and Damuel in tow, so that I could go see Tuuli.

“Tuuli’s working hard,” Lutz observed. “Myne, you should write her a letter using simple words.”

“Okay, I think I will. Thanks.”

It seemed that Lutz had been occasionally tutoring Tuuli. He said he was just doing what I had done for him last year, but thanks to that she was managing to not fall completely behind the orphanage kids.

“Now, please attempt to complete this problem.”

The temple school was covering math today. I headed over to Wilma, watching Tuuli glare at her calculator out of the corner of my eye. Wilma and Rosina had both served under the same master; perhaps I could learn something from what Wilma was given upon coming of age.

“Oh yes, that reminds me—Rosina is coming of age this winter,” said Wilma.

“That’s right. Though I’m not sure what I should give her. May I ask what Sister Christine gave you when you came of age, Wilma?”

A conflicted smile arose on Wilma’s face.

“I came of age after Sister Christine left the temple, so I was not given anything in particular.”

“...What? In that case, I need to get you a gift as well.”

It never crossed my mind that Wilma might not have been given anything, so I hurriedly suggested that I buy her something as well. But she just giggled, her lips curled into an endearing smile.

“Sister Myne, if you’re concerned about that, you will need to give gifts to almost all of your attendants.” Delia and Gil had not been given anything for their baptism ceremonies either, she explained.

“And will it not dampen Rosina’s celebration if you also give presents to me, Gil, and Delia? Not to mention that Fran might feel left out as the only one not getting anything.”

“Mmm...” All I wanted was for everyone to be happy, but it was so hard to make that happen.

Wilma, wearing her usual peaceful smile, leaned forward as I fell into thought. "We servants are happy to be given any gift from our master. Not to mention, anything Rosina wants will ultimately be related to music... Perhaps she would appreciate some new sheet music?"

"New sheet music! That might just be it."

"...Though it would have to be quite rare music for it to not have been in Sister Christine's collection."

Well, let's just say it'll be easy for me to find new music for her...

The next day, I visited the High Priest.

"High Priest, I've decided to give Rosina new sheet music for her coming of age ceremony. Please teach me how to write sheet music."

"What songs do you even intend to write down?"

"Ones I remember, of course."

If it would be unreasonably difficult for me to find music here that the art-loving shrine maiden Sister Christine didn't have, then all I had to do was write down songs I remembered from Earth. It wouldn't be too hard as long as I knew how to write sheet music. Surely.

"Ones you remember from your dreams, you mean?"

"Yes. I can't think of any other songs that Rosina wouldn't know already."

"Fran, bring me the harspiel from her room."

"Understood," Fran replied.

While Fran was getting my instrument, the High Priest taught me how to write sheet music. Naturally, it was quite different from the sheet music I remembered. The scales I could write using the sheet music I had been given as a reference, but I had no clue about other notations and conventions.

"I have returned."

"Thank you, Fran." I plucked the small harspiel Fran brought me while searching my memory for music.

"Oh? That's not it... Maybe this? Oh, right, right. It goes like this... Hmhmhm..." Once I had worked out a measure of the song, I wrote it down on a sheet and asked the High Priest to double check it for me.

"High Priest, have I written this correctly?"

"...Enough of this. Give me the harspiel."

It was at the fifth measure that the High Priest lost his patience with me and took the instrument from my hands. He readied the small, child-sized harspiel and glared at me.

"You, sing. I shall work out the notes. It will be much faster for me to write the music than for you to learn to do it yourself."

Prompted on by his sharp look, I began humming the song. I continued until the High Priest raised a hand, signaling for me to stop.

I did, and he began strumming out the entire part that I had just hummed. My jaw slowly dropped as he adjusted the notes, arranging the song into one fit to play on a harspiel, then wrote it all out on the sheet.

...Is there anything the High Priest can't do?

Not only had he grasped the song entirely from my humming, he had even arranged it for the harspiel and put it down on paper in the blink of an eye.

"Myne, do you know any other songs?"

"...There aren't many songs I could play from memory, but if humming is all you need, then I know a lot more."

My answer earned me a satisfied nod from the High Priest. "Then hum."

"Wha?"

"I was just thinking that I would like some new music for myself. Yes, in fact I think I would like three more songs."

He was going out of his way to arrange the songs and write them out for me, so I didn't mind humming three more songs for him. I went ahead and even took the opportunity to mix in some anime songs. It was kinda fun to watch the High Priest playing anime music to test the notes and arrange the song.

"You may copy these and give them to her."

"I thank you ever so much."

I put the High Priest's handwritten music sheets into my drawer and stealthily copied them whenever I saw Rosina and Fran busy with paperwork. Once I had finished copying all four songs, I had Lutz poke holes down their side and tie them together with string for convenience.

"All done!"

And so, the coming of age ceremony was held on the last Earthday of winter. Delia and Gil worked hard to draw water first thing in the morning, which Rosina bathed in. Once done, she put on her new gray shrine maiden robes provided to her by the temple. Her skirt used to be short enough to show her calves, but now it went down to her shoes, and on top of that she now had her hair bundled up behind her head.

"I feel like it's a waste for you to be bundling your pretty hair up, Rosina." I felt a little sad thinking about how I would no longer get to see Rosina's luscious, wavy chestnut hair trailing behind her. Delia, on the other hand, was looking at Rosina's hair with envy.

"It's not a waste! I wish I could be bundling up my hair right now."

Wilma always bundled her hair up in a tight, plain ball, but Rosina had decided to leave hers loose and feminine. Rosina already looked mature for her age, so the moment she bundled her hair up she looked like an adult woman; her slender white nape became fully visible, and the strands of glimmering hair that hung out of place somehow made her look so much more sensual.

“You really are pretty, Rosina.” I let out an awed sigh at Rosina’s adult appearance, which made her smile with embarrassment.

“Geez!” yelled Delia. “I’ll be even more beautiful when I’m all grown up.”

“I’m sure. You’ll certainly be beautiful too, Delia.” I gave Delia an amused smile, then congratulated Rosina and saw her off to the chapel where the coming of age ceremony was being held.

“See you soon, Rosina.”

“Indeed. Until then, Sister Myne.”

Since both blue priests and gray priests would be busy with the coming of age ceremony, I didn’t need to help the High Priest with work today. And Rosina wasn’t here to teach me to play the harspiel.

Having nothing else to do, I went to the orphanage with Fran and Damuel to have Wilma make parue cake batter. I had no intention of teaching Ella the recipe, but I knew the children would be attracted to the smell if she cooked them in the girls’ building. That was why I asked her to come to my kitchen once she had made the batter so that we could cook it there instead.

“Wilma, would you care to come to my chambers for Rosina’s sake? There will be men there, but they’re all ones you know. I think Rosina would be happier if you were there to celebrate with her.”

“...I believe I would care to come. I’ve grown more used to men through working with gray priests in the dining hall and workshop, so I believe I can briefly partake in the celebration.”

I started to return to my chambers with Wilma, who was carrying a bowl of parue cake batter. Fran and Damuel met her with wide eyes, choosing to walk at a distance from her so that she would feel comfortable.

“I have returned, Sister Myne.”

“Welcome back, Rosina. We’ve been waiting.”

Rosina returned to my chambers prior to third bell, once the coming of age ceremony had ended. When she came walking up to the second floor, I took her hand and guided her to a seat.

“Sister Myne?”

“Go ahead and sit down, Rosina.”

“But I cannot sit down while my master still stands.” Rosina firmly refused to sit down. I looked up at her, not sure what to do, and Fran

pulled back my own seat with a sigh.

“Rosina is correct, Sister Myne. If you want her to sit down, you must first sit down yourself.”

I obediently sat down in my seat, after which Rosina followed suit, a troubled look on her face. At that moment, a sweet, fluffy scent drifted in from the kitchen.

“Wilma?!” squeaked Rosina, her eyes wide with surprise. Wilma had a welcoming smile on her face as she set a plate of parue cakes down in front of her. Delia beside her, on the other hand, looked especially serious as she poured a cup of tea.

“Today we celebrate you, Rosina,” said Wilma. “At Sister Myne’s suggestion, I cooked these for you.”

“...They look quite delicious.” Rosina looked at the parue cakes and the carefully poured tea, then at all of us surrounding the table, tears welling in her blue eyes. I looked up at Fran, who went and retrieved the sheet music from my desk.

“These songs are my gift to you. If you would like, please practice and play them for me.”

“...I know none of these songs. How in the world did you...? Sister Myne, I thank you ever so much. You gathered everyone here for my sake, and... I’m just... I-I just don’t know what to say...” Rosina beamed a sparkling smile while hugging the bundle of sheet music to her chest.

“Congratulations on coming of age, Rosina. May the gods bless you and the future that awaits you.”



Rumtopf and Shoes

Although the calendar said it was now spring, all that meant was fewer blizzards; the cold was still unforgiving enough that it felt like anything but spring outside. That said, fewer blizzards meant that Tuuli could come visit me more often. I was getting closer to returning home every day, and I couldn't wait.

One day, Tuuli brought a small jar with her.

"So, Myne. Weren't we supposed to eat this in the winter? What should we do with it now? We just kinda left it where it was since you weren't there. Mom asked me to ask you what to do with it."

She set the jar on the table and opened it up. The sharp scent of alcohol immediately rushed into my nose. Inside the jar was droop fruit soaking in wine—it was the rumtopf jar I had been letting stew back at home. I let out a squeak, having entirely forgotten how hard I worked to jam fruit in these back in the summer.

"Gaaaah! We've got sugar and honey here, plus the jam I made, so I completely forgot about this stuff!"

"...I knew it."

The rumtopf—a mix of various fruits soaked in wine—was completely ready. The sharp corners of the fruit had rounded as it started to melt into the wine. It was ready to eat right away, but what would be the tastiest way to eat it?

"This is hard. At the time, I was thinking of making (ice cream) or (pudding) for it, but parue cakes are the easiest sweets to make at home."

That was back in the summer, before I found out that I'd be spending all winter in the temple. My plan had been to bring sugar and the rumtopf to Lutz's place for them to cook. They would share their eggs, milk, and labor for my ice cream and pudding recipes, which could then be eaten with the chopped-up rumtopf fruit sprinkled on top. But that plan was ruined now that I couldn't go to Lutz's place. I would need to think of a simple way for my family to eat it at home.

"We can just eat these on top of parue cakes?" Tuuli asked.

"You cut the fruit up into tiny bits first. I think Dad will be happy if you and Mom eat the fruit, but leave him the wine that's left over. And if you want to put it on something other than just parue cakes, it's nice on French toast too! We made that together once before,

remember? There's also, um... There's also..."

Rumtopf was usually eaten with stollen, a traditional German fruit bread, but our home lacked an oven we could bake bread in.

"Myne, calm down. What can we make here that we can eat it with? We can't use parue cakes, right?"

"...Right."

I wanted to avoid Ella learning about the parue cake recipe if possible, which meant that we couldn't make parue cakes if we wanted the help of a chef. But there also wasn't enough rumtopf to feed everyone if we involved the orphans and used the kitchen in the girls' building.

"This is tricky. (Stollen) is a classic, but it takes a little too much time to make for us to eat today. Hmm... Maybe I'll have Ella make (crepes) instead?"

"...You don't mind making that recipe public?" Tuuli, knowing that my recipes were valuable both for the Italian restaurant and for selling to Freida, looked a little cautious.

"It should be fine. I've already seen some things similar to (crepes), so..."

I was referring to the galette-esque meat pies I had seen, which were simple combinations of meat, mushrooms, cheese, and so on baked in buckwheat dough. They were sold as a light meal at eateries. However, there weren't any desserts based on those galettes. Not as far as I was aware, at least. It all came down to the fact that people in the lower city prioritized getting full over eating tasty sweets.

"Fran, how long would it take you to prepare cream?"

"Given how cold it is, not long at all. How much do you need?"

I turned around and saw that Fran already had his diptych out, ready to take notes.

The fat in unprocessed milk naturally separated from the liquid if kept somewhere cold, so as long as you had milk, it wasn't too hard to make cream. Though you had to be a little careful, since it would turn into clotted cream if it lost too much water.

"A cup's worth of cream and a cup's worth of milk will do."

We could have made galettes using the buckwheat flour in the kitchen's pantry, but I personally preferred plain wheat crepes.

Sweets which used sugar were generally eaten by nobles, and if I was going to use the kitchen in my chambers, it would probably be better to aim to make noble food rather than mimic things eaten in the lower city. We were going to make crepes with whipped cream and chopped up rumtopf.

Fran went to the noble zone of the temple to get cream from the large ice room he assured me was there, and while he was gone, I got to work writing down the crepe recipe. Ella would have to make the

crepes going entirely off my instructions.

“So, Tuuli. There’s this food that people make by, um, mixing buckwheat flour with water and salt to make batter, which they then cook with ham and cheese. Do you know what I’m talking about?”

“Oh, buchlettes?”

“That sounds about right.”

Now knowing what they called galettes here, I wrote “cook thin like a buchlette.”

As I finished up the recipe, Fran returned with two handled pitchers containing milk and cream respectively. He set them down in the kitchen before coming up to the second floor, where I showed him the board with the recipe written on it.

“Fran, please direct Ella to make these. Tell her that they are cooked like buchlettes, and that I only want her to cook the batter—that is, with nothing inside of it. That will probably be enough for her to understand. Please bring them up on a plate once they are done.”

“Understood.”

I handed the recipe to Fran, at which point Tuuli stood up, holding the rumtopf jar.

“Um, Fran. Can I watch her cook? I’ll help if I can!”

It was clear that Tuuli really wanted to see a pro chef at work, so I stepped in on her behalf.

“Fran, Tuuli is quite used to my recipes and won’t get in the way. Try asking Ella if she wouldn’t mind working with her. I would like to go myself, but I know that would just make everyone too nervous to work properly. I will wait here while you take care of Tuuli.”

Making sweets together was very girly and just seemed really nice, if you asked me. All winter Ella had been cooking with Nicola and Monika as her helpers, and even during their breaks they sounded like they were having a ton of fun as they chatted away. I would have liked to go cook with Tuuli, but as an apprentice blue shrine maiden I had no choice but to sit back.

“Rich girls actually have it rough, huh?” Tuuli looked at me with sympathy, knowing that I wasn’t truly free even in my own chambers.

I gave her a firm nod. Here in the temple I was the weird one with a different upbringing, so it was really nice to have someone who could sympathize with my plight.

“Uh huh. Everyone cares so much about appearances here.”

“...Appearances, like your socks?”

Tuuli and I both looked down at my feet. Then we made eye contact and laughed. Acting like a noble rich girl really was rough.

“Sister Myne, what was that about your socks?”

After Tuuli and Fran left for the kitchen, Delia walked up with her eyes full of gleaming curiosity. I couldn’t help but smile; Delia always

slid over when the topic moved to clothes or hair.

“We were just joking about how cold these socks are.”

My socks were made of thin fabric and long enough to go halfway up my thighs, held up by string since there wasn't any rubber in this world. Every morning when getting dressed in the temple, I first had a cloth belt tied around my waist. Then I had socks pulled up my legs, which were tied to the belt using long strings. It was basically like a simple garter belt.

I then put on something like a pair of culottes, which were thin and went down past my knees. Strings were threaded around the cuff by my knees, allowing me to tighten them around my legs. It wasn't exactly the best underwear I could ask for—it was a lot more breezy down there now than it was in my Urano days. Finally, after all that, I put on a shirt.

But no matter what, my bare legs weren't allowed to be visible. Showing one's bare legs was considered shameful in the upper classes, especially among nobles, so men and women always wore socks without fail. It was a matter of personal grooming and courtesy, such that anyone not wearing socks was seen as embarrassing.

I started wearing socks once I was given the Gilberta Company apprentice clothes, and now in the temple even gray priests and shrine maidens always wore socks.

“...Sister Myne, what do you mean the socks are cold?”

“Unlike here, the socks of the lower city are made with practicality in mind.”

They were for warmth, not fashion. Nobody wore them in the summer. When winter came, we stuffed our feet into what were essentially bags woven out of wool, which we then tightened with string. They only went up to our ankles though, which meant we also put on wool-woven leg warmers to cover up to our knees. Add on layers of pants to that and it was as warm as could be.

“But Tuuli's socks aren't fashionable at all,” Delia complained.

“Indeed. But there are times where one prefers warmth to fashion.”

“...If you're worried about warmth, why don't you just buy long boots?”

Nobles were so concerned about fashion and appearances that they didn't use wool leg warmers. Instead, they wore fur-lined boots that reached all the way up to their knees. Those boots would definitely be warm.

But I hadn't realized we weren't allowed to wear leg warmers in the temple, and I was already so broke that I didn't bother ordering fur-lined boots. Instead, I was using the short leather boots that Gilberta Company apprentices wore, designed with mobility in mind.

“If only I were an adult and could hide them under a long skirt...”

Thin socks did nothing to stop the cold when I was walking through the temple, but when I tried to put on leg warmers, Rosina stopped me; my skirts only went to my knees, so any leg warmers I put on would be completely visible. I let out a disappointed sigh, and Delia’s eyebrows shot up as she gave me a sharp look.

“Geez! You can’t slack on fashion, even if nobody can see!”

Wow... Delia’s girl power really is off the charts.

I cared more about warmth than fashion, but I was in Rome and had to do as the Romans did.

“I will remember to order longer boots for next winter. I would not like to suffer through this cold again.”

“That would be for the best.”

“Sister Myne,” interjected Rosina, having found a break in her work, “you must order some new shoes soon. You do not have a single pair of fashionable, fancy shoes that a proper lady should be wearing. I believe it would be wise for you to ask Master Benno to summon a shoemaker.”

She advised me that, with the Spring Prayer coming up, I might find myself in trouble if I only had a pair of plain shoes.

“There is still enough time for them to finish before Spring Prayer if you order them soon.”

“Rosina, tell me about things like this sooner so I have time to prepare.”

“Yes, I shall be more proactive from now on. I just was not entirely aware of all that you lack, Sister Myne.”

Rosina had never even considered that I might actually only have one pair of shoes. She had assumed that I always appeared to be wearing the same shoes because I had multiple pairs, and only once I began living in the temple over the winter did she realize the shocking truth.

There were two kinds of shoes used in the lower city: the sabot-esque wooden shoes that poor people wore, and the leather shoes worn by the rich. Those who didn’t even have wooden shoes either wrapped rags around their feet or just walked barefoot, which wasn’t particularly rare.

I had always worn wooden shoes up until I was given my Gilberta Company apprentice clothes, and it never occurred to me that I might need to buy new shoes before I had worn out my existing ones. My new surroundings had changed my perspective on shoes even though I had owned several pairs for different occasions back in my Urano days.

I opened up my diptych and wrote “Ask Benno to order shoes” on it.

“So, Sister Myne! What kind of leather will you use? Horse leather? Pig leather? Oh, what about ordering a pair of cloth shoes as well, just in case?” Delia’s eyes were sparkling. She really was quick to bite when fashion was involved.

But sadly for her, I had absolutely no fashion knowledge. There was no way I could make informed decisions on what shoes to buy when I didn’t know what designs were popular or what materials were most commonly used or anything like that. My plan was to let Rosina choose and learn from her example.

“I will entrust the designing of my shoes to Rosina. Please order the ones I will need most in the near future. If I were to order my own shoes, I would just end up ordering what I already have.”

“Understood. You may count on me.”

Rosina began to explain which kinds of shoes were expected to be worn in which kinds of situations, and before long Fran and Tuuli came up from the kitchen with plates. One had freshly beaten, pure white cream while the other had chopped-up rumtopf.

“Delia, please prepare the tea.”

“Understood.”

At Fran’s order, Delia headed to the kitchen. Tuuli and Fran then lined up cutlery before returning to the kitchen, coming back with a plate holding two round, freshly cooked crepes. One for me, one for Tuuli.

“I apologize for the wait, Sister Myne.”

Fran set the plate in front of me. The crepes looked exactly like the ones I remembered. A sweet scent tickled my nose and made me break out into a smile.

“I helped cut these!” Tuuli said, proudly pointing at the plate of rumtopf. She then told me how skilled Ella was and how hard her helpers had worked.

“Fran, my apologies, but could you bring some honey as well? Also, please ask Ella to come up here if possible.”

“For what purpose?”

“I wish to show her how to properly plate these sweets. In the future, she will make them from beginning to end in the kitchen.”

I knew that Fran would not be fond of bringing a chef up to the second floor, but I didn’t want Ella to think that the process of making a crepe was done once you’d cooked the batter.

“I can teach her the final steps, Sister Myne, so I believe you need only show me what to do next.”

“Then watch carefully, Fran.”

While everyone’s eyes were on me, I scooped up cream with a spoon and slathered it on one-sixth of the closer half of the fan-shaped crepe. I then spooned up some of the chopped rumtopf to sprinkle on

top.

“Spread the cream across the closer half of the crepe such that it forms a triangle. It is best for the layer of cream to be somewhat thin. Then sprinkle the rumtopf on top of the cream—the more the better here. Rumtopf can be swapped out for whatever fruit is in season, so it isn’t necessarily required.”

I poured a little honey on top of the rumtopf as I explained, then folded the crepe before rolling it up.

“Doing this allows you to eat the crepe with your hands. If you want to use cutlery like a noble, then you can just keep folding it without rolling it up. Then you just have to decorate it with cream, fruit, and honey to finish it off.”

I unrolled the crepe on top of the plate and added some cream beside it, along with some cute rumtopf and honey decoration.

Fran blinked in surprise several times at the sight of the completed crepe.

“...This certainly would be presentable to nobles.”

“Wow, it’s so cute! I bet it tastes great, Mynel!” Tuuli, brimming with excitement, started preparing the crepe on her plate.

Delia was watching on, filled with curiosity, but she had to wait until we were finished eating. I thought it was sad that I couldn’t eat with my attendants, but it was a strict rule I had no say in.

“All done!” Tuuli announced, sounding very much satisfied as she looked at her plate. She had done a pretty good job considering she had zero experience decorating plates like that.

“O mighty King and Queen of the endless skies who doth grace us with thousands upon thousands of lives to consume, O mighty Eternal Five who rule the mortal realm, I offer thanks and prayers to thee, and do take part in the meal so graciously provided.”

I cut off a mouthful from the part of the crepe without any cream on and plopped it into my mouth. The crepe was soft, faintly sweet, and very lightly crisped around the edges. Then I cut off a part with cream. The cream itself, accompanied by the crepe’s somewhat springy bread, wasn’t that sweet, but the honey I poured over it added just the right amount of indescribable sweetness.

After savoring the taste for a while, I finally tucked into the rumtopf. The second I bit into the melted fruit, my mouth was filled with the sharp taste of alcohol and an intense sweetness.

“What do you think, Tuuli?”

“It tastes great, Mynel!” Tuuli beamed me a full smile, cream dotting her mouth.

“Tuuli, your mouth is covered in cream.”

“That’s ’cause these are hard to eat.”

It took some dexterity to properly eat crepes using cutlery. I

smiled at Tuuli's battle with the crepe ending with cream all over her mouth, thinking about how food tastes a lot better when you can eat it with someone else.

"This is perfect. I want to eat (caramel custard) next time. Maybe we can make it next time you visit, Tuuli?"

"New sweets? Yay! I can't wait!"

With all my heart, I hoped to go home as soon as possible so I could share these tasty sweets and this indescribable happiness with my whole family again.

Completion of the Metal Letter Types

After asking the High Priest if I could let a merchant visit my chambers, I requested that Benno bring a shoemaker to me as soon as possible.

“Blessed be the melting of the snow. May the Goddess of Spring’s boundless magnanimity grace you.” Benno, saying the greeting that celebrated the arrival of spring, entered my chambers with a couple of shoemakers.

“May you have the blessings of Flutrane the Goddess of Water and her subordinates,” I welcomed them in turn, remaining seated in the hall.

With my bodyguard Damuel giving them hard looks, Benno, the shoemaker who looked to be of a similar age, and the shoemaker’s assistant measured my feet and asked me what kind of design I wanted, plus what material I wanted to use.

“Hm,” Rosina thought aloud. “Our highest priority is preparing shoes for Spring Prayer. She will need tall boots made of horse leather.”

“White horse leather it is, then,” Delia chimed.

“Delia, think well about this. The Spring Prayer will demand that she walk through farming towns. A darker color would be more suitable for this purpose.”

Rosina and Delia began discussing it among themselves without giving me a chance to speak my own mind. Fran was listening to them with a stiff expression because I had asked him to watch over them.

Delia loved cute, pretty things—the fancier the better, in her eyes—and whenever shopping was involved her excitement got out of control. There was no mistaking that she would make the shoes increasingly extravagant if left to her own devices.

Rosina, on the other hand, had a good fashion sense and knew what I would need thanks to her time spent serving Sister Christine, but her sense of scale was a bit off. If she approached this like Sister Christine did, spending endless amounts of money to buy everything she wanted according to her tastes and mood, I would end up broke. And just as I expected, she was adding to the order bit by bit, saying things like “These are quite wonderful” and “We may as well use this opportunity to order these as well.”

It was Fran who put a firm stop to their madness.

“Delia, the shoes do not need more decoration than that. Rosina, Sister Myne is still growing, so she does not need such a large number of shoes. It would be best if we just purchased new ones over time as she grows.”

Fran had previously been the High Priest’s attendant, so he knew well the bare minimum of dress that was necessary to satisfy society’s demands. But both he and the High Priest were men, so their appreciation of cute and pretty things could not compare to Rosina’s. He would simply rein Rosina and Delia back while they made the important choices, with my job being to make the final order.

“Sister Myne, will these do?”

“Yes, I believe these three pairs will do just fine.”

In the end, we ordered a firm pair of tall horse leather boots that reached up to my knees and a soft pair of short pig leather boots for the Spring Prayer. The third and final pair would be fancy cloth shoes for wearing inside the temple and in the Noble’s Quarter.

Once the order was finished and the shoemaker was preparing to leave, Benno glanced my way.

“Forgive me, but I have something important to discuss with Sister Myne. Fran, could you take these two gentlemen to the gate?”

“Delia can handle that, actually. Fran, please have her escort the gentlemen out. Rosina, please prepare some tea.”

Fran nodded at Benno, then told Delia to escort the shoemaker and his assistant to the gate. She enthusiastically guided them out the door, in a good mood thanks to all the shopping.

“So, what do you want to talk about?”

“Sister Myne, Johann came to my store the other day. It seems he has finished the task you gave him.”

I blinked in surprise. I had agreed to be the patron of the young smith Johann at the end of autumn. He needed to complete a task to finish his lehr apprenticeship, and I had given him one in the form of completing a catalog of metal letter types.

“Wha? Um... Benno. When you say ‘the task,’ you mean the letter types, correct? Um... I didn’t think he would finish them so fast.”

I had ordered both uppercase and lowercase versions of the thirty-five letters of the alphabet, and Johann’s task had been to make me fifty types for each vowel and twenty for each consonant. Never in my wildest dreams did I expect he would finish them all over the winter.

“It seems that he would like you to appraise them, Sister Myne.”

The task the apprentice smiths needed to complete was ultimately an order from a customer. It was necessary that they first show the finished product to the customer and hear their appraisal.

“It would be preferable if you could come to my store to see them, but if that is not possible, may I bring Johann and the smithy’s

foreman here with me?"

"...I will ask the High Priest."

"Very well."

Damuel and the High Priest were both very sensitive about people entering my chambers, so I couldn't answer Benno without first receiving their opinions on the matter.

"I informed Johann that you would be unable to visit the store as long as the snow remained, so I ask that you proceed extremely carefully and keep the High Priest informed at all times."

In other words: *You better friggin' talk to the High Priest.*

And so I immediately requested a meeting with the High Priest. He had gotten through most of his built-up work over the winter, and maybe due to all that extra time he now had, it didn't take long at all for him to set up a meeting.

"Um, High Priest. Would it be okay for a smith named Johann and his foreman to visit my chambers?"

"...The fact you refer to him by name leads me to infer that he is an associate of yours."

"That's right. As his patron, I need to appraise what he has made for me."

The High Priest nodded, lightly tapping a finger against his temple. "Myne, does this smith know that you are an apprentice blue shrine maiden?"

"No, I have not mentioned it. Given that Johann thought I was Benno's daughter, I would imagine that Benno hasn't told him either."

"I see. In that case, do not invite him to the temple. It would be wise to go to Benno's store instead."

"Why could the shoemaker come, but not Johann?" I asked, tilting my head in confusion.

The High Priest sighed. "The shoemaker visited the chambers of an apprentice blue shrine maiden at the Gilberta Company's introduction. But Johann would be visiting the temple to show Myne of the Gilberta Company what she ordered."

"...Ah." I put a hand over my mouth, and the High Priest narrowed his eyes.

"I gathered as much information as I could from various places over the winter, and it seems Benno has been hiding you quite well. Exceedingly few know that the child with connections to the Gilberta Company is the same person as the temple's new apprentice blue shrine maiden, and likewise few know your true identity."

That reminded me—I had mentioned Benno always talking about keeping me out of public view. If even the High Priest's investigation led him to conclude not many people knew about me, Benno must have been working really hard all this time.

“You may go to the store. I would not like to publicize that you are an apprentice blue shrine maiden.”

“Okay. I’ll go to the Gilberta Company.”

It was my first time going outside in a long time. I felt a giddy smile of relief creeping onto my face at the prospect of getting to leave the temple, but I desperately tried to hold it back so as to hide my emotions like a proper noble would. Sadly, the High Priest trashed my efforts with a single comment: “The twitchy smile on your face is unsettling and disturbing.”

“Damuel, you will protect Myne while she is gone. Myne, it is essential that you prepare a carriage to take you to the store. Do not just walk about outside. You can contact Benno about the carriage. Furthermore, take care to minimize how much you are both seen in public.”

“Understood!”

“I’ll be careful.”

I nodded at the High Priest’s list of warnings, letting my smile show freely. *Just wait, my pretty little letter types! I’ll come visit you as soon as I can!*

Naturally, I couldn’t go straight away just because the decision had been made. It was first necessary that I call Lutz from his work in the orphanage to send a message to Benno and ask that he prepare a carriage for me.

Benno contacted the smithy and set up a date for our meeting. Since bad weather and blizzards would stall the carriage, it was possible that the meeting would be delayed.

“If these types match what I want, I’ll need to order blank types and symbol types as well. I may as well write supply orders for them now.”

I wrote out my next supply orders before the meeting came. At the same time, I prepared what I needed to visit the store. If possible, I would want to demonstrate printing there.

“I think I should bring the ink, paper, baren, and rag just to be safe. It would be wise to show them how the types are used. Fran, please ask Gil to have the workshop prepare what I need.”

“Understood.”

“Um, Sister Myne. Why in the world are you visiting a lower-city store?” asked Delia with an exasperated expression as she watched me excitedly talking to Fran about what I needed for my visit to the Gilberta Company.

I had absolutely no idea how much information Delia was feeding back to the High Bishop, so I just smiled. “I will be appraising goods. I am a patron of the arts, as fate would have it.”

My companions this time were Damuel and Fran, as well as Gil, who felt an odd sense of rivalry toward Lutz. He kept talking about how business with the Gilberta Company was part of his domain as manager of the workshop, so I decided to bring him along. I could give a brief explanation of how to use the letter types in the store, but since I couldn't do any work myself, I would have Gil do the honors.

The four of us headed to the Gilberta Company, rattling inside the carriage Benno had sent to pick us up. Damuel's face scrunched up the second we passed through the temple gate and were assaulted by the smell—he had never visited the lower city before.

"What in the world is this stench?"

"This is just how the lower city smells. You have to get used to it."

That's the face of someone who's only ever known the pretty Noble's Quarter and the well-kept temple. I understand, I really do.

I had probably made the exact same face the first time I stepped out into the lower city after becoming Myne. But it hadn't taken long for me to get used to it and accept it as a natural part of everyday life. Humans were creatures of adaptation, and it really was amazing how we could get used to and endure just about anything.

"I am afraid this is a part of the task the High Priest has given you, Sir Damuel. Guarding me will necessitate that you visit the lower city."

"...I see. That is one cruel task."

Damuel still had his face scrunched up as we arrived at the Gilberta Company. Mark exited the front door of the store to greet us.

"Thank you for visiting our humble establishment, Lady Myne. Everyone is waiting for you inside."

"Hello, Mark. Thank you for having me."

"Apprentice, your hand."

Damuel held out his hand like it was the most natural thing in the world, but I had no idea what to do. A rich girl would normally allow him to escort her, but I lacked the experience to know how to gracefully allow myself to be escorted down from the carriage.

The carriage steps were narrow, and like, the gap between them was massive for me. Even if I took Damuel's hand, it was possible I would fall over on my way down.

"Sir Damuel, Sister Myne is still too small to be escorted safely."

As I stood frozen with a cold sweat running down my back, Fran took it upon himself to inform Damuel of the situation and carry me down himself.

"Ah, of course. My mistake, apprentice. I haven't spent much time around young ones and don't know how to properly accommodate them."

"Worry not, Sir Damuel. It is I who must hurry and grow so that I

may be escorted like a proper lady.”

Though the road to ladyship is hard enough that I'm not sure I'll be a proper lady even when I grow up, I added silently as we entered the store.

Mark guided us to the usual office.

“Master Benno, Lady Myne has arrived.”

Johann, the smith foreman, Benno, and even Lutz were waiting inside for me.

“I hope you have not been waiting long,” I said while entering the office.

Both Johann and his foreman gasped with wide eyes. I couldn't blame them for being surprised, though; unlike how casual and normal I had been before, I was now talking in a dignified tone with three companions following behind me.

“Lady Myne, I thank you for visiting.”

Benno greeted me, after which Johann and the foreman hurriedly did the same.

I sat down in a chair that Fran had pulled back for me, then smiled directly at Johann, who was sitting across from me.

“Good day, Johann. I was told that you had finished the task I gave you.”

“I did, but...”

Johann, looking nervously between the three people behind me and the foreman, set two cloth-wrapped boxes down onto the table. I heard the clinking of metal as the letter types inside knocked against each other. That sound alone was enough to make my heart rate go up.

“...There were too many to fit in a single box without it being too heavy, so we had to split them between two.”

Making letter types started with making letter punches—pieces of hard metal with the pattern of a letter protruding from the end, sculptured by filing and chiseling. It took extremely precise work to make one; you needed to carefully chisel and file down the end of a piece of metal around a single centimeter in width and height, which necessitated the precise craftsmanship that Johann specialized in.

Once the letter punch was finished, you pressed it into a softer metal to make a matrix, which was what the molds used to cast a letter were called in letterpress printing. The raised letter on the letter punch would be imprinted into the metal matrix. Then, you would put said matrix into a hand mold and pour alloy into that. Once the alloy cooled it was removed from the hand mold, giving you a letter type for the exact same letter as the letter punch, and the mold could then be refilled to make more letter types for that letter. By repeating this whole process, you could make a set of letters all the exact same shape

and size

“I am surprised you finished so quickly. I never thought they would be done this soon...”

I felt an indescribable excitement in my chest just from staring at the cloth-wrapped boxes. Blood rushed to my head and I let out a tiny sigh while holding a hand against my pounding heart. Feeling like Juliet looking for a vanished Romeo, I stared hard at the cloth, hoping to see through it and into the box.

Johann, not noticing my urgency, scratched his cheek while giving a little embarrassed laugh. “...Everyone helped a little since they found it so challenging and fun.”

Johann had made the letter punches and matrices for all the letters, but the other craftsmen—bored as they were with nothing to do over the winter—helped him produce the letter types themselves in volume.

The foreman, grinning, slapped Johann on the back. “We fought over who could pour the alloy the best and talked about ideas to do it all faster while laughing our butts off at how hard the work was for a leherl task. ‘Of course a patron who’d take Johann would want something like this,’ we’d laugh. It’s the guidance of Vulcanift, God of Smithing!”

He was teasing Johann, but it seemed that the foreman really did think that Vulcanift the God of Smithing had brought me and Johann together. I needed precise work done, and Johann had the skills I was looking for. I too was eternally grateful that we had met.

“These letter type things are the fruit of all our hard labor. Johann, show’m to her.”

“Yes, sir.”

At the foreman’s urging, Johann untied and removed the cloth. Beneath were two thin boxes the size of a sheet of A4 paper, and within those were lines of silver metal blocks that, while dull in appearance, seemed to twinkle and glitter as the light reflected off their sculptured letters. The sight of all the letters lined up before me was indeed overwhelming.

“Wow...”

I picked up one of the letter types, my hand trembling with literal awe. It was a thin piece of silver metal about two point five centimeters long, with the firmly indented letter resting on one end. The metal was weighty despite its small size, and I held it up to look at it from every angle.

I then took out another letter type and lined them up next to each other, narrowing my eyes as I confirmed whether they were the same height; any difference in height would have an enormous impact on printing. But the letters were exactly the same height, better than

anything I could have expected. A smile spread across my face before I could even think about stopping it.

“So, ma’am? Are these what you wanted?”

The foreman’s voice knocked me back to my senses. I looked around and saw that Johann was waiting for my appraisal with bated breath. I looked between Johann and the boxes packed full of letter types, then gave a firm nod with a letter type in my hand.

“They’re wonderful! You truly have become Gutenberg!”

“Wha?”

“Johann, I award you the title of ‘Gutenberg’!”

“Huh?”

Everyone stared at me with baffled looks on their faces—everyone except Lutz, who had gone completely pale and rushed over to shake me by the shoulders.

“Calm down, Myne!” he said.

I looked up at him in protest, still sitting down. “How could I be calm?! This is Gutenberg we’re talking about!”

“Idiot, you’re getting too excited!”

Lutz was kinda freaking out, but I couldn’t stay calm with a completed set of letter types right in front of me. No way.

“You’re just not excited enough, Lutz. This is going to change history, you know. Isn’t that exciting?! Doesn’t that just make you giddy? Go ahead, let your emotions out! Let us share in these feelings of joy!”

“Sorry, Myne, but I’m not following at all.”

It seemed that Lutz couldn’t empathize with my excitement. I looked around and saw that everyone else looked just as confused, like they didn’t realize the significance of this at all. Was there anything more sad than being the only excited one in the room?

“I mean, this is the beginning of the printing age! You’re literally bearing witness to the exact moment history was changed forever!”

I stood up with a clatter and explained the glory of the letter types as passionately as I could, but the reaction I got was subdued at best.

“This is the second coming of Gutenberg! His first name was Johannes, and now he’s changing history as Johann! What a splendid coincidence! A fateful meeting of legend! Praise be to the gods!” I shot my arms up in the praying stance as Lutz cradled his head.

“Err, ma’am? Who’s this ‘Gutenberg’ you’re talking about?” asked the smithy foreman, blinking in confusion.

Happy that at least someone was trying to understand, I clasped my hands together and looked right at him. “Gutenberg is a legendary craftsman on the level of a god whose work changed history and books forever. Johann is indeed this city’s Gutenberg!”

As I explained, it occurred to me that letter types weren’t the only

things used in printing. You needed paper, ink, and a printing press too. Perhaps everyone was reacting so poorly because it was odd of me to give all the credit to Johann.

“...Oh, I get it. There are a lot of people involved here. The people making the ink, those helping construct the printing press, Benno making the paper, and Lutz selling the books. I shouldn’t leave anyone out, you’re right. Sorry. You’re all Gutenberg. You’re all members of a big Gutenberg family!”

“I don’t wanna be a part of that family.” Benno immediately refused my companionship.

“What do you mean, Benno?! That’s disrespectful to the Gutenbergs, who are going to print books and influence the entire world! You should be happy about this, really. Your heart should be pounding with glee. Okay?”

Benno gave me a half exasperated, half defeated look before glancing at Lutz, who waved his hands as if to say “I’ve got nothing,” and then sighed.

“Now that the letter types are done, we can finally get started on the printing press! Let’s order what we need from a wood workshop right away. Aah, we’re actually getting on to printing! Wow! Just wow! Praise be to Metisonora, Goddess of Wisdom!”

As I struck the pose again to praise Metisonora, my glee climaxed and knocked me unconscious.

Temple Stay Extended

I was dished up a full course of lectures when I came to. First Lutz and Benno, then Fran and Gil, then finally Damuel and the High Priest. I got the feeling that as time went on, I kept meeting more people who would lecture me.

...But really, I wish they wouldn't use "visiting me while I'm sick" as an excuse to lecture me in bed. Just let me sleep.

The longest and most heated lecture this time came from Damuel. Apparently he had been terrified after I collapsed out of nowhere, fearing that the High Priest might determine that he too was a knight who couldn't follow his superior's orders.

"I thought for sure I would be executed this time! I was like a dead man walking when we brought you back here," he said angrily with tears in his eyes.

"I'm sorry. I really am sorry. Also, just to warn you now, once the printing begins I'll probably start passing out from excitement all the time."

"You're not sorry at all, apprentice!"

"I'm sorry that I haven't exercised enough to make the passing out stop."

"That's not what you should be sorry about!"

It was hard to keep up my excitement for the letter types with everyone lecturing me day in and day out, so my fever went down surprisingly fast. But the lectures continued even after I was feeling better. It was honestly pretty boring since they kept repeating the same things over and over. I just wanted to go home already; the snow was melting enough for carriages to travel about, so it was very nearly time to.

"I just want to go home..."

But first, I had to write a letter asking for a meeting with the High Priest. Or so I thought, but I ended up getting a letter requesting a meeting from the High Priest first. Though it was less "requesting a meeting" and more him asking me when I was free, since I would be visiting him rather than the other way around.

"Fran, it is rare for the High Priest to send me a letter himself. His business must be urgent. I would like to meet him as soon as possible—I wouldn't mind going today, even—but I'm not sure what I should tell him."

“His attendants would likely struggle to prepare for your arrival if you went so suddenly. I believe tomorrow will be an ideal date,” said Fran with a half-smile, so I went ahead and wrote a letter saying I would be free tomorrow.

“Should I bring a gift for him or some such? He did visit me while I was sick, after all.”

During his visit the High Priest had brought me a lot of food, though I didn’t really need any of it since the snow had started to melt and I would be going home soon. At the moment I was thinking of moving half of it to the basement storage in the girls’ building.

“Some of the sweets you have been making here will suffice. The High Priest quite liked your cookies.”

“What about the caramel custard I made recently then?”

On recent Tuuli visits I had experimented with both caramel custard and ice cream. The result was a firm reminder that ice cream was best eaten during warm weather. Ice cream was always tasty in modern heated homes, but here even eating it in front of a fireplace just made one more focused on the cold than the food; it actually did chill the whole body.

“Hm. The caramel custard is certainly delicious once you have gotten used to the texture, but eating it for the first time is a bit... uncomfortable. I do not believe it would be a good gift for someone who has not tried it before.”

Just as I had expected from Lutz’s reaction to the steamed potatoffels, steaming wasn’t a cooking method employed here. Ella was very surprised when she learned how to make the caramel custard, and all those who tried it commented on the texture and mentioned being worried about it disappearing before they could get it into their mouth. But in the end, they all had high praise for how sweet and tasty it was.

“In that case, have Ella bake the cookies that the High Priest likes so much.”

I settled on cookies as my gift. There would be plain and tea-flavored ones, since those were my favorites.

With that settled, I got to work on the blueprints for the printing press. I was pretty sure that the first printing presses on Earth were just modified grape presses, so they couldn’t be too hard to make. The only problem was that I didn’t remember the exact measurements or structure or anything like that.

“Umm, I’m pretty sure it needs a tool for smearing ink? Something with a handle like this, and leather spread out like this... A place on the side to hold it, next to the place for putting the paper down... I think the place where the types get lined up looked like this?”

I desperately searched my memories, but they were so vague that

the blueprints were hardly coming together. I could give vague instructions in person, but it was beyond me to write out detailed measurements. It seemed I would have to write these out while experimenting with a press in person.

I wonder if the High Priest would use that memory searching tool on me again, I thought to myself while working on the design at my desk. My attendants were scattered about the room, working their hardest to complete their own tasks.

“Good morning, High Priest,” I greeted him while handing over my gift.

“You shouldn’t have,” he replied with an utterly blank expression while taking them. I had absolutely no idea whether he was actually happy or not.

“Arno.”

The High Priest called Arno over, who came and set down a plate on the table. Fran unsealed the cookies and stacked them onto the plate. He then took out the cup he had brought from my room, which Arno poured tea into before filling the High Priest’s as well.

“At your leisure, Sister Myne.”

Arno slid the plate of cookies in front of me. Having no idea what he expected from me, I looked at the High Priest.

“When bringing someone food as a gift, it is common courtesy for the visitor to take the first bite to test for poison. I imagined this was not a custom you were familiar with, and thought now would be a good opportunity to teach you.”

Test for poison...? Um, that’s scary.

I could eat the cookies without worry since I had brought them myself, but hearing that made me nervous about eating or drinking anywhere outside of my chambers.

“The one who invited the other will drink the tea first.”

The High Priest took a sip of his tea, which had been poured from the same pot as my tea was, as I ate a cookie. Once that was done, we both dined at our leisure.

Fran seemed to be right when he said that the High Priest had taken a liking to the cookies. His expression remained unchanging, but the cookies disappeared faster than the other food on the table.

We talked for a bit about casual subjects like the weather and the status of the orphanage. Then, when we had finished enjoying our cups of tea, it was time for the meat of the discussion.

I’ve gotten a little used to noble culture now. I think. I want to believe I have.

“Um, High Priest. I would like to go home soon, and I was wond
__”

“No.”

Before I could even finish my sentence, the High Priest set his cup down and refused.

“...Bwuh?”

I cocked my head to the side in confusion, clueless as to why the High Priest wouldn't let me go home despite the fact that the snow was already melting. He stood up, pushing his chair back with a clatter. Then, after looking over the room once, he headed to the hidden room past his bed.

“Follow me.”

Apparently it was something he didn't want his attendants to hear. I set my cup down as well and stood up to go through the door he had just opened. Once inside, I sat on my usual bench while he sat on his usual chair.

“Is this something you don't want your attendants to hear?”

“...Indeed. The fewer that know this, the better.” The High Priest breathed in slowly before continuing. “I was recently informed that Wolf died unexpectedly. It happened just after I asked Karstedt to send someone to investigate him.”

The word “died” made me reflexively swallow. But I couldn't help but slowly tilt my head, because there was one important detail I didn't quite get.

Um... Who's Wolf?

“You seem extremely confused.”

“Um, High Priest. This might be a silly question, but who is this Wolf person? I feel like I've heard that name before, but it's not quite coming to me...”

The fact that no face came to mind upon hearing the name meant he probably wasn't someone I knew personally. The High Priest was talking about him as though he was someone I would know, so I was sure he was someone important, but I just couldn't remember him.

The High Priest's eyes widened in utter disbelief. Then, he let out a heavy sigh. “Wolf is the head of the Ink Guild.”

“Oh, that suspicious person?” The head of the Ink Guild accosting Lutz and sniffing around for information about me was the very reason I had been stuck in the temple all winter. “Wait... He died?! How?!”

“That reaction took way too long!”

It seemed that Karstedt and the High Priest had been investigating Wolf to see whether the rumors about him were true, and to find out which noble had ordered him to investigate me. But just as they were narrowing down the possible suspects, Wolf died out of nowhere.

“It seems that Wolf had learned from *somewhere* that a commoner shrine maiden was serving as a forewoman.”

The fact that he placed so much emphasis on the “somewhere” reminded me that surprisingly few nobles knew the truth about me. There weren’t many nobles who could have provided that information.

“Wolf was investigating what the forewoman in question looked like and whether she did in fact have connections to Benno. However, you retreated to the temple as soon as his investigation began, and on top of that your ill health has led you to spend very little time outside with others. It seems that his investigation went poorly.”

The High Priest’s words made my heart jump. Wolf had been tasked by nobles to investigate me, but not only did he accomplish very little, he ended up the focus of an investigation led by Karstedt and the High Priest. Then, all of a sudden, he died. It wasn’t hard to make a connection there.

“...Did the nobles kill Wolf?”

The High Priest gave a slow but firm nod. “Almost certainly.”

The lives of commoners were nothing to nobles; they exterminated anyone who got in their way. I knew that, but the fact it had happened so suddenly and right in front of me still made me shudder. I hugged myself, rubbing my hands along my goosebump-covered arms.

“...Are the nobles targeting me?”

“There can be no doubt that several nobles are targeting you, but we do not know who they are or what their intentions are. I would guess few do,” he said, his words so severe that I started to tremble. “Nobles who rule farming towns will be leaving all at once when the Spring Prayer begins. Our greatest fear is you being taken from the city, so you will need to stay in the temple until enough of the nobles have left. When there are fewer nobles remaining in the city, it will be easier to identify their loyalty and motives.”

He isn’t saying I can never go home, at least.

I consoled myself while sadly agreeing to stay in the temple until the Spring Prayer. The High Priest let out a small sigh of relief at my compliance, then took out a small board the size of his palm.

“I will need to discuss both the extension of your stay and your adoption with your family. Give this to them.”

“...Okay.”

Me being adopted by a noble was too heavy of a discussion to just casually drop into conversation when Tuuli or Dad visited. I had planned on bringing it up when I returned home, but it seemed that the High Priest would be breaking the news to them while I was stuck here. I drooped my head as I looked at the letter of invitation the High Priest had handed me.

“I imagine you understand this already, but tell nobody about

Wolf or the adoption. Not all of your attendants can be trusted,” he said, and thoughts of Delia immediately came to mind. I could not protest.

As soon as I got back to my chambers, I had Fran get Lutz so I could give him the letter of invitation. He agreed to deliver it to my parents, but looked real curious about how I could have messed up hard enough to warrant the High Priest summoning them. All I could tell him was that I wouldn’t be able to go home until Spring Prayer was over. That information was fine to make public. Or rather, it was something I had to tell everyone—my attendants included—if I wanted to avoid a lot of problems.

“What will we do for food, though?” asked Delia, having listened in on my conversation with Lutz.

I smiled. “The market will open soon, and we still have the food the High Priest gifted to us.”

It turned out that the High Priest’s gift had been a consideration to ensure I could safely stay in the temple even after winter ended.

My parents came three days after Lutz had delivered the letter. It was there in the waiting room by the gate that I saw my mom for the first time in ages. The sight of her usual smile and her big belly—big enough that it looked as though she might give birth any day now—made warm feelings swell inside of me.

“Mom...”

“Sister Myne, these are not your chambers. I understand how you feel, but please consider your position.”

Fran gently held my shoulder back, a conflicted expression on his face. Mom pulled back the hand she had extended toward me, and Dad comforted her with an arm around her shoulders.

“Please, follow me.” Fran walked off and I followed behind him. Damuel walked beside me while my parents followed behind us.

I walked forward, resisting the urge to turn around, when a gentle hand stroked my hair—a hand that was softer than Dad’s. I couldn’t help but smile. I tried to turn around, but the fingers squeezed a little as if to tell me to keep facing forward. It was funny how the hand slid back whenever Fran turned to look at us. Sometimes it switched to a larger hand, and our silent communication continued until we reached the High Priest’s room.

“Good morning, High Priest,” Mom said.

“You sent for us, sir?”

Dad gave a soldier’s salute to the High Priest, who nodded and offered them seats. The table had a bench on one side and two chairs on the other. Considering our respective statuses here, my parents

would be sitting on the bench while the High Priest and I would be on the chairs. My mom struggled to sit on the bench due to her belly, but Dad helped her and they both sat down together.

“You may all leave.”

The High Priest cleared the room once his attendants had brought our tea. On top of that, he used the area of effect magic tool to soundproof the area around the table.

Dad looked around anxiously. “Wh-What the...?”

“This will prevent our voices from being heard outside the room. Myne, you may sit with your parents now that it is just us. I imagine you have shown much restraint on your way here.”

While explaining the magical barrier to Dad, the High Priest gently pushed me in the direction of my parents. I had been standing in place, unsure of where to go.

“I thank you ever so much, High Priest.”

I thanked him with a broad smile before plopping myself down between my parents. I looked at each of them, then gave Mom a gentle hug.

“It’s so good to see you, Mom. I’ve missed you so much. It looks like you could be giving birth any day now!”

“Not yet. It’ll be getting a little bigger,” Mom said as she hugged me. I rubbed her big belly and let out a sigh of satisfaction.

“...You seem to be satisfied now. May I begin?”

“Yes.” I straightened up and faced the High Priest, who was sitting across from us.

“Now then. Let us skip the tedious introductions and get to the point. Any objections?”

It seemed that the High Priest understood from his time with me that he would get nothing from giving customary noble greetings to commoners, and so he skipped all the lengthy greetings he had given during the meeting with Karstedt.

“Myne will be staying in the temple until Spring Prayer ends.”

“Hold on a second. Why? The agreement was that she would just be staying during the winter.” Dad leaned forward, barely containing himself.

The High Priest eyed him coldly and continued with a flat expression. “She is in more danger now than ever before.”

The short answer Dad received was enough for him to realize things had escalated beyond his control. He calmed his expression and held a hand over his clenched fist.

“What danger?”

“Speak of this to no one,” said the High Priest before explaining what had happened from autumn to now, also offering brief asides about the situation. It was all things I had already been told.

“Myne has far more mana than I expected. This mana is important to the city, as we are experiencing a shortage. It is for this reason that some nobles wish to control her, and other nobles wish to destroy her.”

He explained that nobles were targeting me for various reasons. Mom and Dad paled, and I could feel their hands trembling on my back.

“The worst-case scenario is Myne being taken from the city. That is why there have been some changes regarding the rules for nobles entering the city. I imagine you are aware of these changes, Gunther, as a soldier assigned to the gates.”

Dad’s eyes widened at the unexpected turn in the conversation, but he kept his gaze steady. “...I am. The Knight’s Order has implemented different rules for the passage of nobles.”

“Yes, because it will likely be a noble who attempts to kidnap Myne. We do not yet know if a noble of this duchy or another will make their move first; it was necessary to mobilize the Knight’s Order and ask the archduke to restrict the entry of nobles into the city.”

It seemed that Karstedt and the High Priest had been working behind the scenes while I wasn’t aware.

“All those changes were made just for Myne?” Dad asked in disbelief.

“There are several other reasons, but all I will say here is that protecting Myne was one reason. I have no intention of stating anything more on the subject. That reason alone will be enough for you, I imagine.”

Dad nodded, relaxing just the slightest bit.

“Nobles entrusted with land will be returning to their territory as Spring Prayer approaches. As fewer nobles will remain in town, it will be easier to keep an eye on their actions. I request that you endure living apart until then. This is all to protect Myne.”

The High Priest’s words had a quiet, sincere strength to them. It would be safe to say that he was used to leading people. He had once led the entire Knight’s Order, after all.

Dad’s soldier instincts seemed to kick in as he offered a salute. “Thank you for your special consideration. But why are you going so far for Myne’s sake...?”

“Did I not mention that her mana is precious? She must be kept safe. Though these tedious measures would not be necessary if she would just agree to the adoption,” said the High Priest with an exasperated sigh.

“Adoption?!” yelled Dad, his eyes shooting wide open. My mom squeezed my hand tighter in hers.

“Gunther, what would you say to Myne being adopted by a noble

as soon as possible?"

I could hear Dad gritting his teeth together. Mom was squeezing my hand so hard it hurt, like she was never going to let go again. Their answer was silent, but clear.

"Like parents like daughter, I suppose..." The High Priest tapped a finger on his temple, murmured "I thought she would give in if both her parents agreed to it," then looked at us.

"Myne likewise said that she didn't want to leave her family under any circumstances, so I agreed to delay this matter until she turned ten years of age. But she has far more mana than any Devouring commoner should. She will be adopted by a noble when she turns ten. This is not negotiable."

"What...?!"

My parents froze as though they had been struck. Their opinion had not mattered, and they were told the adoption would happen regardless of what they thought. It looked like they didn't know how to react to the High Priest, who was clearly working to protect me, but simultaneously taking me away from them.

"One who does not know how to control their immense mana is nothing but a danger to themselves and everyone around them. If the archduke determines that she is a threat to the peace of the city, she will be executed."

"Executed?!"

"It is necessary that the protector of a city eliminates those dangerous to it. As a soldier, I imagine you understand this well."

Dad, unable to imagine that his daughter was that dangerous, looked at me with a bewildered expression, while Mom furrowed her brow in dismay. The High Priest, looking at them both with an expression that kept his emotions completely hidden, continued his dry explanation of the circumstances.

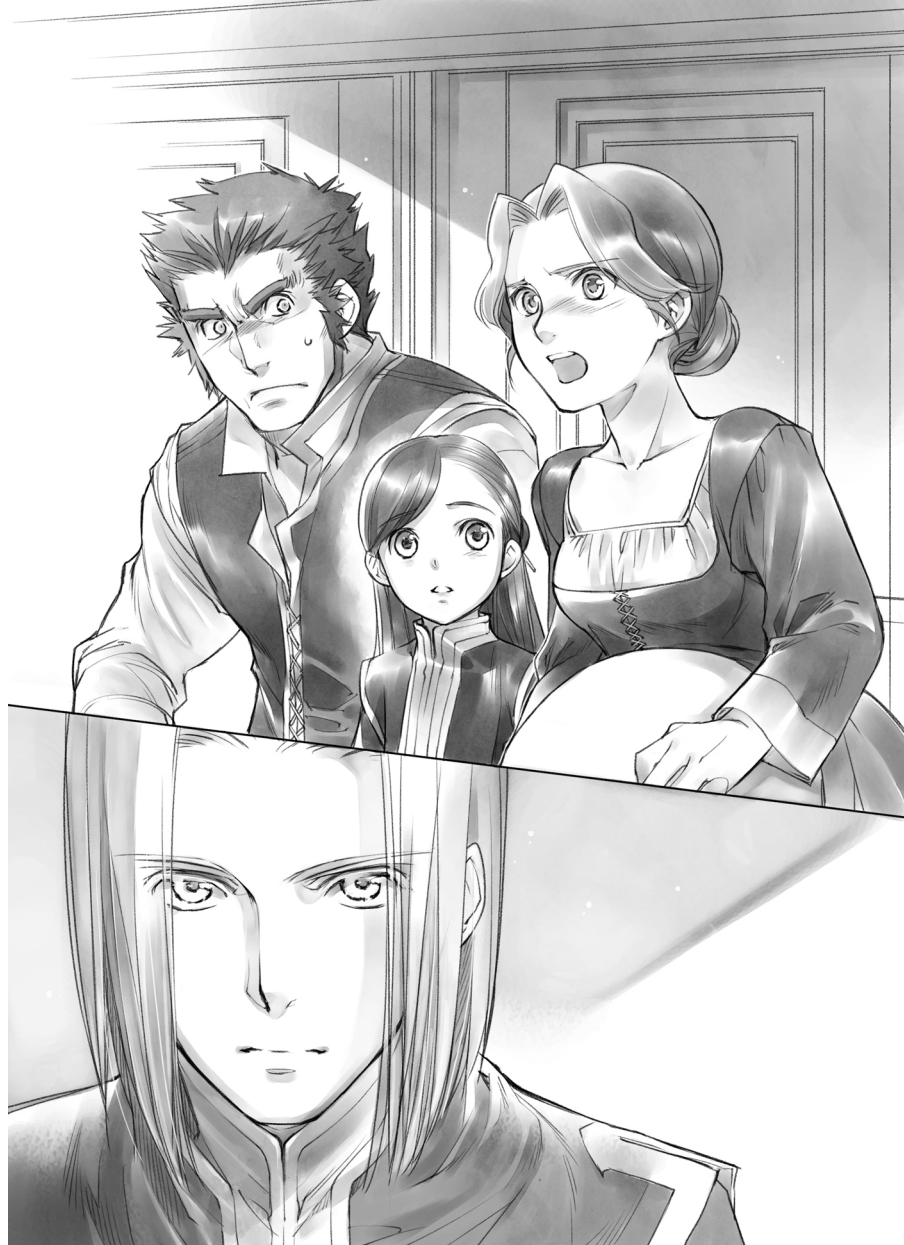
"She must learn to control her mana to avoid being executed. Hence the adoption. She may stay with you until she turns ten years of age and leaves for the Royal Academy. However, when that time comes, there will be no allowances made. She will be adopted, or she will be executed. The choice is yours."

"Ten years old..." Dad murmured the time limit in disbelief, as it gave us only two years together at most.

The High Priest let out a slow sigh. "She will be adopted by a noble of good character, one who has my full trust and backing. He will not treat her poorly. That I can promise."

The moment he said that, my mom's head shot up. She looked the High Priest straight in the eyes and nodded.

"Understood. I will entrust Myne to you."



“Effa?!” Dad yelled in surprise, but Mom ignored him. She kept her eyes locked on the High Priest.

“When I learned that Myne would be staying in the temple over the winter, I thought that her poor health would be unable to bear it. But Tuuli has told me that Myne has been doing well here, thanks to everyone supporting her. I am sure that is thanks to your efforts, High Priest.”

Mom, pregnant as she was, could only hear about my life in the temple through Dad and Tuuli. But she knew that I had survived the winter without being bedridden the whole time thanks to everyone helping to take care of me.

“Effa, you... I get it, but adoption is—”

Dad started to protest, but Mom held up a quiet hand to silence him. She briefly lowered her eyes, then slowly shook her head.

“No, Gunther. Think about this. There are many kids who start living away from home as leherls once they turn ten, remember? I don’t want Myne to be executed for being too dangerous. She would be in a lot more danger if a noble who doesn’t know her well kidnaps her. The High Priest has treated her very well. If we have to let her go, I at least want someone I trust to have her.” Mom turned to the High Priest and crossed her arms in front of her chest. “High Priest, please take good care of Myne for us.”

Mom’s words took the fight out of Dad. He slumped over in sorrow, then saluted by tapping his right hand twice against the left side of his chest. My parents officially consented to me being adopted when I turned ten.

“I really don’t want to turn ten now...”

I knew they were doing it for my sake, but an indescribable sadness still pierced my heart. I continued clinging to Mom for a long time, hoping to shake off even a little of the lonely desolation gripping me.

Preparing for the Spring Prayer

It was gradually getting warmer, and about half of the snow that had blanketed the city had melted. Winter hibernation was over, and it was time for everyone to start shoveling the remaining snow in preparation for spring. Tuuli had to go back to work, which meant she could only visit me at the temple every other day.

The orphanage finished all of its winter handiwork, which we sold to Benno through Lutz. That gave me a lot more leeway when budgeting for the orphanage. The forest was still too snowy to gather anything there, but that snow would all melt before long. Then we could get back to gathering while making paper.

The time until then was dedicated to education, with gray priests that used to be attendants teaching the children proper manners. It seemed that the priests were worried that me wandering around the orphanage so much was instilling bad habits in the children; they feared that, by allowing them to continue speaking to me so casually, they might end up acting the same way around other blue priests as well. The teaching all happened in the dining hall, which left the workshop empty; it was just me, Lutz, and Damuel there.

“I want to have the printing press ready for the next round of books, even if we can only use it for the text,” I said.

“Sounds good to me,” replied Lutz. “But how’re we gonna make a printing press?”

“Mm... I was planning on just modifying one of the presses we already have.”

I took out my blueprints and showed them to Lutz. If I remembered correctly, Gutenberg’s first printing press had been made out of a grape press used for making wine. I was sure I could make a rudimentary printing press like that, but it was surprisingly hard to recreate the steps from memory alone.

“You arrange the letter types here, cover them with ink, put down the paper... and then just press it.” I made the motions of using the normal press (which was too high for me to reach and use on my own) while trying to explain what a printing press was like. Since I couldn’t leave the temple, it was down to Lutz to order what we needed and give instructions to the workshops.

“Guess we’ll have to decide on how big the thing where you lay out the types—the, uh... forme? Yeah, how big the forme will be,” said

Lutz.

“We can work that out by measuring the picture books we’ve already made.”

I started using a ruler to measure all sorts of things, adding the measurements to my blueprints as I spoke to Lutz about the printing press. I wrote down all the instructions I could remember, ranging from “Make the stand for the paper slightly slanted” to “Put a box for holding ink here.”

Lutz looked at all that and shook his head. “Hey, Myne. Can’t we add all that extra stuff afterwards?”

“Extra? But everything I’ve mentioned is essential.”

Though knowing my memory, I was probably forgetting more than I was remembering—not to mention all the things I’d potentially misremembered and just hadn’t noticed yet. But my protests just earned another head shake from Lutz.

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” he said, pointing at my blueprints. “I get that we need somewhere to put the ink, but it seems to me the problem you’re having here is figuring out how to attach it to the press. Can’t we just put a box for the ink on the table for now?”

Lutz was right. As long as we could affix a forme for the letter types beneath the press, we could do the bare minimum of printing, even if there were unnecessary steps slowing the process down.

“You’re thinking too hard about this ’cause you’re already picturing the finished product in your head. Remember how we used a bunch of makeshift tools when we were first making paper? We can do the same here. Just focus on what we absolutely need for now, then we can build on that over time.”

“...Right. Now that you mention it, the bigger problem here will be getting the craftsman to make a press that can actually be operated by children.”

I finished the simple blueprints while we chatted. We settled on starting with a basic design which we would order from Ingo’s carpentry workshop through Benno.

“Now we just need to talk about the smaller stuff...” As the printing press itself was now sorted out, I tried to move the discussion on to the forme and the composing stick, but before I could say anything Gil rushed into the workshop.

“Sister Myne!”

“What’s wrong, Gil? Is it already time for me to go to the High Priest’s room?”

All of my female attendants were busy preparing for Spring Prayer today, hence me not having harspiel practice.

“Er, nah. Rosina just asked me to come get you. Thing is though, she’s really mad that you’re spending all your time working on the

printing press when we're not ready for Spring Prayer yet. She's not really showing it, but she's, uh... kinda furious."

I got the feeling that she was just venting her anger in my direction since she was getting less time to play the harspiel while I got to go off and do whatever I wanted.

"I see. In that case, could you let her yell at you in my place?"

"Sure! Wait... Hold on a second. No way! I don't wanna!" Gil, having only just realized what I said, shook his head hard. He looked so funny that Lutz and I couldn't help but laugh, earning us a glare and a murmur that he would bring me back to my room no matter what. It seemed I had no choice but to give up and face Rosina's wrath.

"...Oh well, there's no point delaying the inevitable. Lutz, I'll leave the rest to you."

"Got it. You've got an important job tomorrow, right? Good luck. I know you can do it." Lutz ruffled my hair, and I nodded without much enthusiasm before heading off back to my chambers, led by a pouty Gil.

I gasped when I saw the disaster zone that was my chambers. On top of all sorts of clothes, shoes, and various grooming implements being brought out and stuffed into boxes, there were towels, linen products, dishes, writing utensils, paper, and diptychs being thrown into the mix by my attendants. It was like I was moving out entirely. There were several wooden boxes within the hall already stuffed with food, and there were several still-empty ones that would be packed with cooking utensils from the kitchen once my meal for the day had been prepared.

I climbed to the second floor and saw that my own room was even more of a mess. There were three boxes lined up—one for linen, one for clothes, and one for shoes—and the top of my table had been dominated by various daily necessities. Among all the chaos was Delia, Rosina, and Wilma.

"Sister Myne, you mustn't go to the workshop while we are still preparing for Spring Prayer." That was what Rosina said, but I knew I'd just get scolded if I tried helping them; I had been told quite firmly that preparing was work for attendants and thus something I mustn't involve myself in. It seemed that my job was to spend all day watching everyone else work.

"Geez! You're hardly motivated at all! This is an important job for you, Sister Myne!"

"...I mean, I trust that you are all skilled enough to handle this without me watching over your every move."

"That's not the problem here."

Those accompanying me for the Spring Prayer would be Fran, since he had accompanied the High Priest on one before; Rosina, since there needed to be a girl to take care of me; and Hugo and Ella, who would cook for me.

Delia, Wilma, and Gil were staying behind to manage my chambers, the orphanage, and the Myne Workshop respectively, while Todd, the other chef, would make food in my absence alongside Nicola and Monika, both of whom had helped Ella over the winter.

“Still, this is a lot of stuff,” I murmured subconsciously after looking around my room and seeing just how much stuff I had bought to last me the winter here. Rosina raised a bemused eyebrow.

“You are on the lighter side when it comes to luggage, Sister Myne. Sister Christine would have had two more boxes of clothing, not to mention several more for painting tools and various musical instruments.”

“We had to begin packing Sister Christine’s luggage much earlier than this,” Wilma giggled in agreement. “It was always such a struggle whenever she departed to visit the Noble’s Quarter.”

While I digested just how incredible Sister Christine had been, Rosina’s eyes widened briefly in realization. “...Um, Sister Myne. May I bring a harspiel as well?” she asked hesitantly.

I shook my head, glancing at the harspiels leaning against the wall in the corner of my room. “I think it would be safer to leave them here, especially seeing as they don’t belong to me.” I was borrowing them from the High Priest, so it wouldn’t be wise to take them elsewhere without permission; it wouldn’t be easy to pay for them if they were broken, lost, or stolen.

But Rosina would not give up so easily. Her eyes locked on the harspiels, she continued. “Would you kindly ask the High Priest on my behalf?”

“I can do that much, certainly.”

“I thank you ever so much.”

In the end, I really was of no help sitting around in my chambers, so eventually I claimed it was time for me to help the High Priest and left with Fran and Damuel in tow.

“Preparing for Spring Prayer is quite the task. A call for aid from the Knight’s Order requires urgency, but as an attendant it is an easy job since there are not many preparations to be made.” Fran explained that the preparation required for Spring Prayer was so much worse since we would be traveling to farming towns on carriages rather than highbeasts like we had before.

Personally, I was more depressed about the journey itself than the preparation for it—all my enthusiasm died the second I found out we

would be riding in a carriage. I had the feeling that by the time we reached the first farming town, I would be too exhausted to do literally anything.

"Is there perhaps a way for me to not go to the Spring Prayer at all?" I sighed.

"What are you talking about, apprentice? The Spring Prayer is an important ritual," Damuel said, glaring at me with disapproval.

In reality, I already knew how important it was. *I do wish he'd let me complain a little though, just to blow off some steam.*

"I understand its importance, Sir Damuel. It's just that I can hardly imagine how many days I will spend bedridden after having to endure the journey by carriage."

"...Hm. Considering how daily life is already a struggle for you, I can imagine the journey will be especially hard. But I don't think Lord Ferdinand will let you skip the ritual because of that."

I already knew *very* well that he wouldn't let me wriggle out of it. But still, as my final desperate struggle, I waited until helping time was over and then launched my complaint at the High Priest.

"High Priest, must I really go all the way to the farming towns? I am certain I will fall desperately ill from riding in the carriages."

"Indeed. I will need to bring quite a lot of potions for you," the High Priest replied casually.

My face scrunched up as I thought of the potion he had forced me to drink when I collapsed and he needed me back on my feet.

"...Are you perhaps referring to the potion that's incredibly effective but tastes so bad one would rather die than drink it?"

"Yes."

"Ngh... Now I want to go even less."

I could already picture it: I would collapse on our way to a farming town, have one of the High Priest's nasty potions poured down my throat, be forced to perform the ritual during the boost of energy, then collapse again as we headed toward the next farming town. This endless loop of pain and misery would continue until we had visited every single farming town. The thought alone was enough to make me feel sick.

"High Priest, you have to do something about how bad the potions taste. Either that or prepare a sleeping potion so that I can sleep on the way there, or maybe let me travel on one of those moving magic statues that the knights have. Can you at least do *something*? Please?" I tearfully listed every option that came to mind as I pleaded to the High Priest.

He nodded, looking a bit put off. "...You seem fairly distressed. I will consider those options."

"I would be very grateful. Also, one of my attendants would like

to bring a harpsiel with her, but I imagine that won't be acceptable."

I was so scared of traveling with such an expensive instrument that I would have preferred for him to refuse, but the High Priest granted his permission without a second thought.

"Rather, I encourage it. Rosina can play for us during the journey. Her music will certainly be a source of great comfort during the long nights."

"Wait, really?" I blinked in surprise. "I heard that it was really dangerous outside of town with bandits and beasts all over the place. Is it safe to be bringing such an expensive instrument out there?"

The High Priest looked at me in confusion. "There are no bandits foolish enough to attack the carriages of priests and nobles heading to Spring Prayer."

"...Really? None?" I would have thought that the bandits would be more likely to attack wealthy nobles for all their riches, but it seemed I was missing something.

"Myne, most bandits are local farmers."

"Wha? Aren't bandits, like, bands of thieves that survive by stealing from other people?"

"Fool. If such a group appeared, merchants would begin avoiding roads in that area. Those who braved the danger would have guards, making them a risky target, and after enough incidents the bandits would be targeted by the Knight's Order. It would be ridiculous to think that an entire organization could survive solely by stealing from others."

I had thought that merchants would be traveling back and forth a lot, but it seemed that wasn't accurate. Naturally, I knew so little about the world that the High Priest got exasperated with me.

"It is common for farmers to temporarily turn criminal to threaten passing merchants for money and goods, but if they attacked nobles then no more chalices would be brought to their land. For that reason, there are no farmers foolish enough to lay a hand on nobles or priests heading to the Spring Prayer. Not to mention that even if they did attack nobles, they would be easily defeated."

Bandits avoided targeting nobles not only because their actions directly supported farmers, but also because they all had dangerous amounts of mana.

"So we should be completely safe on the road?"

"...Yes, we should be."

I was curious as to why the High Priest hesitated in his response, but either way, it seemed our journey would be a lot safer than I had thought. That was a relief, and maybe the only relieving thing about this journey.

The morning before we departed for the Spring Prayer was the busiest yet. I was cleaned, dressed in my ceremonial robes, and given my ceremonial hair stick to wear. Since we were heading to farming towns, I wore the pigskin boots that had just recently been finished for me. Fran was talking about how muddy it was in farming towns, but I found it hard to believe anything could be worse than the alleys in the lower city. Although maybe it was wrong of me to think that.

Everything I used to prepare in the morning was stored away in boxes, which were then tightly bound by cords. That was the last of my luggage; now that everything was prepared, Fran and Gil began carrying the boxes to the carriage one by one while Rosina brought the box containing the harpsiel to the carriage herself, cradling it all the while. With not much else to do in my now-empty room, I decided to say goodbye to each of my attendants who were staying behind.

“Wilma, I am leaving the orphanage in your care.”

“Yes, Sister Myne. I can assure you that the children will be polite little angels by the time you return. I hope you will praise them for their efforts.”

As I nodded in response, Gil knelt on the spot with “C’mon, praise me” written all over his face, so I reached out a hand.

“I entrust the workshop to you, Gil. I imagine you will be able to handle everything?”

“Yeah, you can count on me!”

“Delia, please take care of my chambers while I’m gone.”

“As you wish... Geez! Why do you look so nervous?! Sister Myne, I’m more worried about you doing your job properly.” Delia glared at me, her crimson hair a little frayed.

Her being in charge of my chambers wasn’t what had me worried —me going to farming towns in a carriage was.

“Ngh... I’m not so sure about the carriage.”

“Geeez! Don’t make me worry even more!”

“I-I shall do my best,” I said with a stammer, probably making Delia lose the last teensy bit of faith in me that she didn’t even realize she still had.

Once he saw that I had finished saying my goodbyes, Fran approached me. “Sister Myne, it is time for us to go to the carriage.”

“Certainly. Let us depart.”

“Farewell. We await your safe return.”

As my other attendants saw us off, I followed Fran out of the room, Rosina and Damuel following close behind. We headed to the nobles’ section of the temple, since the main entrance there was where the carriages were.

“Rosina and I must perform one final check on the luggage, as well as discuss the upcoming journey with Arno, so please go to the

waiting room with Sir Damuel. The High Priest should be there already.”

And so I headed to the waiting room with Damuel. Along the way I saw the High Priest power walking toward me, his attendants in tow.

“Good morning, High Priest.”

“Good morning. Myne, go to my room; I have an urgent matter to discuss with you. I will be there once I have finished instructing Arno and the others. Do you understand as well, Damuel?”

“Yes, sir!”

The High Priest ended the conversation there and continued his brisk walk over to the carriages. He was moving incredibly fast, but still managed to look graceful while doing so. Damuel and I glanced at each other, then started making our way to the High Priest’s room.

We had no problems getting inside since the High Priest had also left some attendants behind. They offered us seats, and before long the High Priest returned.

“Thank you both for waiting.”

“High Priest, what is the urgent matter you spoke of?” I tilted my head in confusion as the High Priest shut paperwork-filled cabinet after cabinet, locking each one in turn.

“We will be riding feystone highbeasts. I have just sent the carriages to the farming town we will be staying in tonight.”

“...Did something happen?”

“I should hope nothing happens,” he said, entering his hidden room with a bundle of keys. He came right back, now holding a ring with an embedded light yellow feystone and a bracelet boasting stones of seven different colors.

“Myne, put these on.”

“Lord Ferdinand, those are—”

“It is just to be safe, Damuel.”

I could see a similar bracelet on the High Priest’s wrist. He was also wearing a similar-looking ring on his middle finger, which reminded me that he had lent me a ring on the Knight’s Order mission as well. It had been useful then, so I imagined it would probably be useful this time too. I gratefully accepted both and put them on, wearing the ring on the middle finger of my left hand just like the High Priest.

“Furthermore, and it pains me greatly to say this...”

“Yes?”

“We will be accompanied by... another blue priest,” the High Priest said with a grimace.

I opened my eyes wide in surprise just as the door opened and Karstedt came into the room with a blue priest.

“That’s me. The name’s Sylvester. So you’re the commoner

apprentice shrine maiden, huh?”

He looked down at me with strong-looking brows and deep green eyes, his blue-tinged purple hair tied behind his back. My eyes were drawn to the silver cord that tied his hair back. He was a bit shorter than the High Priest, but had a more muscular build, making him seem much more like a former knight than the High Priest did. Age-wise, he seemed about as old as Benno and the High Priest, though that observation didn't mean much since Benno and the High Priest were definitely not the same age despite the fact they looked that way to me.

“...You're tiny. You sure you've been baptized? My guess is you're lying about your age,” Sylvester snorted, giving me a crude stare with his deep green eyes. I almost shouted that I wasn't, but swallowed it down instead. After all, Sylvester was a blue priest. He wasn't someone I could so carelessly argue with.

“Hey. Try chirping 'pooey.’”

After staring down at me for an uncomfortably long time, Sylvester suddenly thrust out a pointer finger. It poked straight into my cheek, digging pretty far in all things considered. I let out a reflexive “Owie!”, which made him look down and shake his head.

“Almost, but no. Chirp 'pooey.’”

It wasn't as hard as last time, but he poked my cheek again while wiggling his finger like a drill. I looked to the High Priest for help. He lowered his eyes, then let out a sigh of defeat and looked away.

“Myne, this man has a terrible personality. But he has something of a good heart beneath his rotten everything else. The best one can do is give up and play along with him. Also, Sylvester, Myne is shockingly weak. Tease her too much and there is a very real risk that she could die. But more importantly—Karstedt, take a look at this.” As he spoke, the High Priest began spreading out a map.

“Sir!” Karstedt headed over to him, leaving me alone with Sylvester and an ill-looking Damuel. There was no one left who could help me.

“C'mon. Chirp.” Sylvester's green eyes were hardening as he continued to poke my cheek. It wouldn't be smart for me to make a noble angry right before a long trip.

“P-Pooey.”

I gave up and... *chirped*... like he wanted. Sylvester gave a satisfied nod, then poked me again.

“Perfect. Chirp some more.”

“Pooey, pooey, pooey...”

The fact I would be spending Spring Prayer traveling with a blue priest like this made me even more terrified of what the trip had in store for me.



Spring Prayer

It didn't take long for Sylvester to get bored of my "pooley" chirping and stop poking me. But in reality, it seemed that rather than getting bored, his interest had just shifted to something else.

"What's this thing?" he murmured before pulling my hair stick right out. Before I could react, my hair was falling down behind me. I shot my head up and saw that Sylvester was looking over the ornamental hair stick that my family had made me. He looked to be an adult in his late twenties, and yet his behavior was exactly that of a wild elementary school boy—unpredictable and unrestrained.

He'll break it! I realized, and the blood drained from my face.

"P-Please give it back."

I reached my hand out. My plea made Sylvester grin like the Cheshire Cat; he raised his hand higher than I could reach and shook the hair stick, telling me to try and get it. As far as I could tell, he had absolutely no intention of giving it back to me.

"Give it back!"

I chased after Sylvester, jumping up to try and grab the hair stick as he moved it around to keep it out of reach. I ran out of breath in no time.

"I'm... asking you... to give it back... It's my... hair stick... The hair stick my father... and mother... and sister made..."

Geez... I hate boys like this.

I looked up at the hair stick dangling above me and clenched a fist, eyes narrowed. I could feel the mana inside of me heating up my entire body, rising forth as anger consumed me.

"G-Gah! Apprentice, no!" Damuel cried out in a panic, leading both Karstedt and the High Priest to turn around and shoot their eyebrows up in anger. They took out their shining conductor's baton-like wands and swiped them through the air.

"You fool! I told you not to tease her too much!"

"Do not bully a small child!"

Two sharp chops landed on Sylvester's head with a very pleasing thumping sound. Their shining wands had transformed into maces before my eyes. I gasped at the thought of how much damage they must have done, but Sylvester himself just shrugged.

"Why so angry? I was just playing around a little."

Sylvester hadn't learned his lesson at all, but now that I knew

Karstedt and the High Priest would punish him whenever he went too far, all the anger boiling up inside of me just faded away.

The High Priest snatched the hair stick out of Sylvester's hand and gave it back to me. "You can put this back on yourself, I imagine?"

"Yes. Thank you, High Priest."

I quickly bundled my hair back up with the hair stick. Sylvester watched with interest, then reached out for it again. Karstedt smacked his hand away with a roar, then pointed at the quaking Damuel.

"Have your fun with Damuel, not Myne. He is made of much stouter stuff," he said.

The High Priest concurred, shooing Sylvester away. "Indeed. Go play with Damuel in the corner. Myne, you come here."

And so, after picking me up and bringing me to his desk, the High Priest resumed his meeting with Karstedt. They continued poring over the map, blatantly ignoring Damuel's agonizing cries.

Speaking of which, the map spread out across the desk made me let out an awed gasp; it was much more detailed than the one I had seen in the Merchant's Guild. That one had only shown the names of cities and roads, so this was my first time seeing one that actually depicted the whole duchy.

The duchy itself was long but thin, stretched out to the north and south with some areas colored red and others colored blue. It seemed that the areas around cities were mostly red, while there was more blue the further away from them you went.

...I wonder what the colors signify?

I was curious, but their discussion seemed serious enough that I deemed it better to keep my silence and just keep looking at the map.

"...Yes, that should do."

"Let us depart, then."

Once Karstedt and the High Priest had agreed on everything, it was time to head to the Noble's Gate.

"Damuel, carry Myne. Sylvester, take this. And Karstedt, this."

Karstedt and Sylvester left the room carrying large pieces of luggage while Damuel followed with me in his arms.

I whispered into his ear. "Sir Damuel, I would like to stay as far away from that blue priest as possible."

"You have no idea how much I agree."

Damuel and I saw eye to eye on this matter. He stepped back from Sylvester a little, on guard. It seemed that despite being a blue priest, Sylvester's family was of an overwhelmingly higher status than Damuel's.

I wanted to stay as far away from Sylvester as I could, for fear of him turning into another Shikza when angry, but he actively followed after us.

“Aren’t you two being a little cold to me?”

“I-It must be your imagination,” I replied while looking around for someone who could take care of Sylvester. But Karstedt was nowhere to be seen, having already gone off ahead. I looked back over Damuel’s shoulder and saw the High Priest catching up to us from behind, having finished giving his final orders to his attendants.

“High Priest...” I whimpered, making him rub his temples.

“Sylvester, keep your distance from Myne. I do not want to deal with her falling apart before the Spring Prayer has even begun.”

“She’d have to be pretty weak to fall apart from this. Isn’t that kinda pathetic?” Sylvester poked my cheek, probably because I was closer to his height now that Damuel was carrying me.

The High Priest swatted his hand away and gave Sylvester a cold glare. “Yes, it is. Myne is so weak and sickly that we must all take great care when dealing with her, however tedious that may be. Do not make me repeat myself yet again.”

Karstedt had opened the Noble’s Gate and was waiting for us in the plaza on the other side. He, Damuel, and the High Priest summoned highbeasts from their feystones while the High Priest gave instructions.

“You lead, Karstedt. Myne and Damuel will stay in the middle, while Sylvester and I shall follow from behind.”

“Does that sound good to you, apprentice?” asked Damuel.

“Sir Damuel, you were not willing to protect me from Brother Sylvester.”

Damuel hadn’t protected me at all from Sylvester’s teasing; he hardly seemed like a reliable bodyguard. I would feel much safer riding with the High Priest, to be honest.

“Th-That’s because...” Damuel froze mid-sentence. He thought for a moment over whether he should continue, then murmured a quiet “Forgive me.”

Damuel’s highbeast was a winged horse. I got on its back, then Damuel sat behind me and took the reins. The horse spread its wings and flew after Karstedt’s griffon, which had departed first.

Once we flew over the lower city and passed the outer walls, the griffon immediately began descending. We were heading to the winter mansion of the closest farming town to the south gate, the same town that my neighborhood went to on pig killing day. The structure was tall and wide like a centuries-old elementary school, with a field that resembled a sports ground.

Even from high up in the sky, I could tell a ton of people were gathered there. At a glance it looked like about one thousand people. As we descended to the plaza, the people in the middle pushed their way out to make space for us.

Karstedt gracefully landed in the newly formed clearing and dismissed his highbeast as Damuel's winged horse descended next to him. Karstedt picked me up from its back, then Damuel slid off and dismissed his highbeast as well.

"Outta the way!" Sylvester cried out from above as the High Priest's lion descended. Karstedt took a few steps back, still holding me in his arms, and looked up as a blueish thing leapt down from the lion with a loud shout.

"What?!"

"Bwuh?!"

The crowd stirred at the sudden development, and as everyone watched on, the blue figure flipped in the air before landing and striking a pose. His energy seemed contagious; excitement raced through the crowd and everyone cheered as if they were watching a show.

"That idiot's getting carried away."

I felt a vague sense of frustration in Karstedt's voice, and soon enough the High Priest's lion plummeted down as if attempting to smash into Sylvester and crush him. But he simply dodged with an acrobatic maneuver and struck another pose.

"Ooooooh!"

The crowd cheered even more. Sylvester had a very satisfied smile on his face, like an elementary school boy who had just shown off his special talent.

"...Is the Spring Prayer a ceremony where priests give performances to the people?" I murmured, taken aback by how different Sylvester was from the blue priests I knew.

Karstedt shook his head with a grim expression. "Myne, take no heed of him. He is no example to follow. Or rather, he is an example of something you must strive to never become."

"I imagine that Sylvester is a high-ranking noble, considering how casually he interacts with you, Lord Karstedt. Will he make unreasonable demands of me like the late Shikza once did?"

I then asked how I should deal with someone who did what they pleased to those beneath them with no ear for protest, which made Karstedt look a little conflicted.

"He is not a violent man. You can rest assured that he will not harm you. He just happens to be unreasonable... and a walking headache."

"If Sylvester makes unreasonable demands of me, may I come crying to you for help, future adoptive father?" I asked, tilting my head ever so slightly to the side.

Karstedt opened his eyes wide, then gave me a broad grin. "Absolutely. Come to me whenever you like. I'll destroy any villain

that makes my adoptive daughter cry.”

...My future adoptive father sure is a reliable guy.

After I stealthily secured Karstedt's backing, the High Priest dismissed his lion and started making his way toward a small stage at one end of the field. The people parted as he walked, forming a path directly to the stage for him. Meanwhile, Sylvester took out a large chalice about eighty centimeters tall from the bag on his back, holding it reverently while following behind the High Priest.

Karstedt set me down onto the ground and prompted me to follow, but soon realized just how slow my walking speed was and had me back in his arms within seconds. He then strode quickly toward the stage as well. It seemed that my walking speed really was unbearable.

But I'm only slow because adults have longer legs than me. It's not my fault.

After setting me down onto the stage, Karstedt and Damuel moved to the front and looked out across the crowd with hard looks in their eyes to show they meant business. Sylvester handed the large golden chalice—a divine instrument—to the High Priest, who then set it down on top of a large stand placed in the middle of the stage.

“The Spring Prayer will now begin. Chiefs of this town and its neighbors, come forth.”

At the High Priest's call, five men each carrying a lidded bucket that seemed big enough to hold ten liters climbed onto the stage.

“Myne, it is time to work.”

The High Priest picked me up and set me down onto the stand with the chalice, since I couldn't reach it on my own, and I walked on my knees across the red cloth that had been spread over the stand. The chalice looked something like a wine glass. Large feystones were embedded along its round bowl, with smaller ones dotting their way along its elaborately decorated stem down to the base.

I settled down in front of the chalice and placed my hand on the feystones in its base.

“O Goddess of Water Flutrane, bringer of healing and change. O twelve goddesses who serve by her side. The Goddess of Earth Geduldh has been freed from the God of Life Ewigeliebe. I pray that you grant your younger sister the power to birth new life.”

The watching crowd stirred as I poured my mana into the chalice, making it shine with a bright golden light.

“I offer to you our joy and songs of glee. I offer to you our prayers and gratitude, so that we may be blessed with your purifying protection. I ask that you fill the thousand lives upon the wide mortal realm with your divine color.”

Once I finished the prayer, both Sylvester and the High Priest

gently tilted the chalice. A shining green liquid poured over its rim and into the buckets of the lined-up town chiefs.

“Praise be to Geduldh the Goddess of Earth and Flutrane the Goddess of Water!”

Once the first bucket was filled and capped, a portion of the crowd began yelling out prayers and gratitude to the gods. They were probably the villagers of the town that had just had its bucket filled, as similar cries arose from a different crowd when the second bucket was filled. I took care to keep my hands on the chalice’s base and continue pouring mana until the fifth bucket had been filled.

“That will be enough, Myne.”

At the High Priest’s words I finally took my hands off of the tilted chalice, which was then positioned upright again before the High Priest set me back down onto the stage. I stood in the center, having been the one to offer up my mana, Sylvester and the High Priest standing one step behind me to either side.

“Praise be to the gods!” shouted the High Priest. I reflexively made a sharp praying pose, and so too did all those in the field. The townsfolk were probably used to performing this pose every year; they made it a lot more naturally than anyone in the lower city did.

“Thus concludes this Spring Prayer. Show the gods your obedience, and live properly with the new life that has been granted!” declared the High Priest to much cheers and elation, all while Sylvester wrapped the chalice in a cloth and stuffed it back into his bag. Once that was done, the High Priest summoned his feystone highbeast and the two jumped onto its back.

“We must head to our next destination, for we are quite busy this year. May you all be blessed by the gods.”

The High Priest circled his white lion around the crowd once, gold dust sprinkling down onto them. Meanwhile, Karstedt and Damuel summoned their own highbeasts. Damuel picked me up and set me onto his winged horse, which spread out its wings before soaring up into the sky, putting the farming town far behind us.

After that we traveled to the winter mansions of four different farming towns, completing the Spring Prayer at each of them. By the time we were done, the sun was setting and I was exhausted.

“Now we just need to reach where we’ll be staying. Apprentice, don’t fall asleep. You’ll fall off,” chastised Damuel, and I nodded my droopy head while squeezing the reins.

“Myne, wake up.”

“Bwuh?!”

I awoke to the High Priest’s sharp voice and looked around,

finding myself in front of a large estate.

“Where is this place?”

“Baron Blon’s summer mansion.”

According to the High Priest, nobles entrusted with land by the archduke stayed in their mansions near the farming villages from Spring Prayer all the way to the Harvest Festival. They returned to the Noble’s Quarter during the winter to pay taxes and give a report on the last year while all the nobles in the city got to work gathering information on everything that happened over the past year.

“The building over there is where the nobles live, while the visiting priests stay in this estate,” the High Priest continued.

Since priests visited every year during the Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival, nobles with land in the duchy had estates prepared for visiting nobles to stay inside. You could say it was a means of keeping priests separate from them, since although they were born from nobles, they were technically not nobles themselves. As evidence of this, the priests would only be met with a representative when they arrived. That was it. The noble wouldn’t even come out to greet them.

“I believe Arno has already performed the greeting and had them open the locks for us.”

The estate had several carriages parked out front, and the fact that they were all empty allowed me to conclude that our belongings had already been carried inside.

“Welcome.”

Our attendants greeted us together when we opened the door to the estate. There were several faces I didn’t recognize, but I could imagine that they were Sylvester’s attendants.

Arno alone walked forward and whispered to the High Priest. “We would like to prepare for the meal, but there are only two dining halls. What shall we do?”

“We will all eat together in the larger dining hall. However, ensure that Myne and Sylvester are seated far apart from each other.”

“As you wish.”

A farming town wouldn’t yet have enough food to support an entire entourage of priests and their attendants so soon after winter hibernation. They would sell us some vegetables, eggs, and milk, but we had to bring some of our own grain and oil. That was one reason why the priests who stayed behind didn’t want to go to the Spring Prayer.

“Now then, everyone. Dress yourselves up and gather in the dining hall.”

At the High Priest’s announcement, the attendants all headed to their respective masters. In my case, Rosina and Fran came hurrying over to me. The sight of them made me feel like I was home again.

“Welcome, Sister Myne. Let us first change your clothes.”

They guided me to a prepared room. Priests generally traveled in pairs, and a third fancy room would occasionally be prepared for the unusual case where a third priest tagged along. This time, Karstedt, Sylvester, and the High Priest were using the fancy rooms while Damuel and I, lower status as we were, stayed in rooms that were meant for servants.

“This may be rough for you, Sir Damuel, but this room is larger than my home. I do not feel out of place here at all.”

The room may have been on the lower end of the scale for nobles, but it was much bigger than an apartment in the lower city. It didn’t inconvenience me at all. Just having the carpet and sheets that had been brought from my director chambers was more than enough for me.

Fran brought in a tub of water, which I used to bathe with Rosina’s assistance. It felt amazing since I had spent almost the entire day outside.

Once I was clean, Rosina selected clothes the color of fresh grass for me and put the fancy cloth shoes that had just been made for me onto my feet. Out of the many hair sticks I had prepared for the Spring Prayer, Rosina selected the one Tuuli made over the winter. It had yellow, orange, and yellow-green flowers arranged to look like blossoms; those were the colors of spring.

“Hugo and Ella worked quite hard on this meal. They said that they would not allow themselves to be overshadowed by the other chefs.”

“In that case, I will have to give this meal my all as well.”

Having a meal with those of noble status would be nothing but suffering for me. Rosina and Fran had beaten noble manners into my head over the winter, but I was sure that Karstedt—as my future adoptive father—would be closely watching my every move to see how much a commoner could do. There was also Sylvester to worry about. Who knew what he might say? If he were actually an elementary school boy then I could just ignore him, but as he was someone of a high-status noble birth, I couldn’t risk that.

“May I return to my room once we’re finished eating?”

“If you are invited to a post-meal gathering, you are of too low status to refuse.”

Thaaat gives me a bad feeling...

The meal was served in the larger dining hall. Everyone was dressed up. The High Priest was wearing his own personal clothes, which was quite the treat since I had only ever seen him in priest robes or a full set of armor. The clothes were droopy with the hanging

sleeves expected of noble clothing. Sylvester I had likewise only seen in his priest robes, but since I had only met him today, I didn't consider the sight of him wearing personal clothes anywhere near as momentous.

"You certainly do look just like a noble's daughter when you're wearing clothes like that," said Karstedt after seeing me. It should be safe to assume that was a compliment.

I'm glad he didn't reject me on the spot or get disappointed with me.

"I thank you for the compliment, Lord Karstedt."

"I can see the fruits of her winter training," noted the High Priest. "Her conduct and speech has very much improved. Though her frank displays of emotion could still use some work."

He always followed up his compliments with some sort of criticism, so it was hard to feel like he was ever actually complimenting you.

"Sister Myne, here is your seat." Fran guided me to a chair and served me my food.

"How come you get different food than the rest of us?" Sylvester asked after seeing the bowl in front of me.

"Perhaps because the meals were made by different chefs," I suggested. "Fran, do you know?"

Fran lowered his voice and explained. Of the two kitchens here, Hugo and Ella had been given the smaller one to use while the larger one was used for making normal noble food.

"It seems that my food was prepared in a separate kitchen. Given my small number of attendants, it makes sense that my chefs would use the smaller kitchen."

I was fine with that since it meant I got to eat food I was used to, but Sylvester—sitting in the seat furthest away from mine—was looking my way with eyes full of curiosity.

"That smells pretty good."

"Yes, my chefs are quite talented."

Everyone now had their food in front of them, so we crossed our arms and offered up a prayer.

"O mighty King and Queen of the endless skies who doth grace us with thousands upon thousands of lives to consume, O mighty Eternal Five who rule the mortal realm, I offer thanks and prayers to thee, and do take part in the meal so graciously provided."

The moment I took my first bite, Sylvester yelled "Guh?! Why are you eating it?!" Having no idea what he meant, I just cocked my head to the side in confusion.

"...Why wouldn't I?"

"Sylvester expressed interest in your food, Myne," said the High Priest with a shrug. "Did he not compliment the smell?"

It seemed that Sylvester had been demanding I give him my food using the roundabout euphemisms that nobles loved so much. I hadn't noticed at all.

"I won't give away all of it. You can have half, though."

"O-Only half?" Sylvester looked at me in disbelief, like he couldn't believe what he was hearing. But I was the one at a loss.

"This is my food. A proud blue priest of noble status such as yourself wouldn't take all the food a poor commoner girl has, would you?"

"O-Of course I wouldn't. Of course..."

In the end, Sylvester settled for half of my food, his curiosity getting the best of him. It seemed that although half-empty plates were sometimes given to attendants, nobody gave away just half of whatever they were eating to someone. Karstedt and the High Priest gave exasperated sighs as they rubbed their temples, while Damuel was frozen in place with an expression straight out of *The Scream*.

According to what the High Priest later told me, when someone expressed interest in your food it was customary for you to then offer them your plate, and then wait for them to pass it back down to you. In other words, I should have just given him my bowl and waited.

So giving him half was the wrong answer, hm? Darn.

Once he finished the soup I had given him, Sylvester demanded with shining eyes that I hand over my chefs as well. But thanks to Karstedt and the High Priest stepping in, I managed to finish the meal without any harm nor foul. I silently thanked the two for keeping our seats separated, then stood up.

"I must be taking my leave now. I shall leave you to your business."

I said my farewells to the men as they prepared for their after-meal gathering and tried to quickly return to my room, but Sylvester glared at me with his deep green eyes like a predator eyeing his prey. He beckoned me over.

"Hold it, Myne. You're coming with us. We've gotta talk a little more about trading chefs."

...Euuugh. Of course he hasn't given up on it yet.

An After-Meal Invitation

“H-High Priest...”

“I would hope that you know you are too low in status to decline.”

I turned to the High Priest for help since the invitation gave me a really bad feeling, but he shot me down without a second thought.

This is a gathering of nobles, after all. A commoner like me would never have the right to refuse. I know that. But it was worth a shot.

“C’mere, Myne.”

Despite the High Priest having gone out of his way to seat us apart from each other, Sylvester patted the space on the table between him and Karstedt, signaling for me to sit beside him. I paused, unsure of what to do since there wasn’t actually anywhere for me to sit, but Karstedt and Damuel both stood and began to change seats, telling me to just give up.

“Myne, walk around the table as Damuel did and sit next to Sylvester.” The High Priest gave my back a regretful push, knowing that Sylvester’s order wasn’t something that could be refused.

“E-Excuse me.” I walked around the dining hall’s large table and, having no other choice, sat down next to Sylvester. Karstedt was on my other side, so I scooted towards him on my chair as subtly as I could manage. Damuel was sitting opposite to me, and the High Priest was opposite to Sylvester.

“Listen, Myne,” Sylvester began, “how about we trade chefs? You’d be fine with that, right? It’s not stealing; it’s trading.”

But these were Benno’s chefs. He would definitely be mad if I traded them without his permission, and the potential of our recipes leaking would be a big problem.

“The chefs are being lent to me by someone else. I cannot agree to trade them on my own.”

“Then I’ll negotiate with that someone. Who is it?”

Benno wasn’t in a position where he could refuse an order from a noble, but it would be a disaster if the Italian restaurant he had devoted so many resources to could no longer open due to a lack of cooking staff. I could already imagine Benno’s and Mark’s agonizing headaches as they watched their investment drain away into nothingness.

“Brother Sylvester, a humble merchant could not refuse a request

made by one of noble status such as yourself. You would not come to him to negotiate, but rather to make an unreasonable demand he could not refuse.”

“Yeah, I guess it would end up like that with a merchant,” murmured Sylvester, a flash of amusement in his eyes.

It seemed that the High Priest was right when he said that Sylvester had a good heart buried extremely, extremely deep within him. He didn’t explode with anger at my observation; in fact, he raised his chin a little, gesturing for me to continue.

I glanced at the High Priest, who offered a subtle nod. Damuel was trembling beside him, his face a ghastly shade of white, but it just wasn’t an option for me to lose my chefs here.

“My chefs are due to work in an eatery that is planned to open soon. They are in training for that now, and a lot of money has been spent on both training them and preparing the eatery. The sum may not be much to a member of the nobility, but it is an amount that could mean life or death to a commoner. Would you still take the chefs knowing that doing so would destroy that restaurant, Brother Sylvester? If you liked their cooking so much, I would ask that you instead wait for the eatery to open and become a customer there.”

“Oh, an eatery? You’re saying commoners are gonna eat that food?” Sylvester’s eyes widened in disbelief, and with a smile just like the one Benno gave his best customers, I took the opportunity to advertise the restaurant.

“The prices will be expensive enough that only those known as wealthy in the lower city will be able to afford them, and only those recommended by existing customers will be served. The dining area is modeled after the mansion of a noble, and will provide food similar to that which nobles eat—or rather, it will provide food that not even nobles have eaten.”

“Yeah? And who’s gonna introduce me?”

“...Umm, since you seem interested, I will introduce you to them myself.”

In all honesty, I really didn’t want to bear what would surely be the enormous responsibility of introducing an unpredictable grade-schooler like Sylvester to the restaurant, but it was better than him stealing our chefs and ruining everything.

“Alright. Introduce me, then. I’ll give the place a look.”

“I thank you ever so much. Lord Karstedt, High Priest, would you like to come as well?” I pleaded with my eyes that I wanted someone to keep Sylvester under control, and they both reluctantly nodded at the same time.

...Brother Sylvester is kind of a noble, so maybe Benno will appreciate this? Or maybe he’ll hate it. I wonder which. Either way, I want him to

appreciate that I was the one who peacefully stopped his chefs from getting stolen away.

As I silently praised myself for my heroic efforts, the High Priest—a glass of wine and some simple snacks like ham and cheese in hand—suddenly raised his head as though he had just remembered something.

“Myne, why not have Rosina play the harspiel for us?” he asked, which reminded me that he had allowed her to bring the harspiel in the first place so that she could provide “a source of great comfort during the long nights.”

I called Fran over with a glance and told him to tell Rosina that we wanted her to play the harspiel. Karstedt widened his eyes at my words.

“A commoner has a harspiel?”

“The High Priest told me I should learn how to play it.”

I told him about how the High Priest had ordered my education, which made Karstedt murmur, “So he’s already begun his preparations. I would expect nothing less of Lord Ferdinand.” Considering that the High Priest had said nothing of me being adopted by a noble at that point, one could say that his foresight was impressive indeed.

“Myne has a talent for music. You have been keeping up your practice, correct?”

“Rosina is just a talented teacher, that’s all.”

The High Priest directed his praise at me, but Rosina was the one enforcing my practice. She wouldn’t let me skip it no matter how much I wanted to, and anyone who practiced an instrument daily would get better at it. The only reason my piano skills didn’t improve during my Urano days was because I didn’t practice every day.

“I have answered your summons, mistress.” Rosina arrived with the harspiel. A chair from the dinner table had been pulled aside for her, and she sat upon it with a broad smile. Then she played song after song requested by Sylvester.

“Fantastic. How’d a gray shrine maiden like yourself learn to play harspiel so well?”

“I was merely provided the opportunity to dedicate myself to the fine arts by my previous mistress, Sister Christine.”

“Interesting... Alright, Myne. Your turn.”

Personally, I thought it was pretty cruel to ask me to play right after everyone had heard Rosina. We weren’t even comparable to each other. I hurriedly searched for a reason I could use to turn him down.

“I, ah... I’m afraid I’m much too small to play the adult-sized harspiel.”

“Oh? Fear not, Sister Myne. I brought your harspiel as well just in

case something like this occurred. Please allow me a moment while I fetch it from your room.”

...Noooo. Rosina, whyyy...?

I slumped over in despair. Karstedt gave me a comforting pat on the back, holding back laughter while Sylvester, who was also grinning, looked away from me to the High Priest.

“Alright. You go ahead and play while we wait, Ferdinand.”

I was sure the High Priest was going to refuse, but instead he stood up, picked up the harspiel with a single annoyed sigh, and then started to play. The ease with which he could follow up the likes of Rosina was actually pretty impressive, but he had chosen to play the anime song I had taught him.

...The arrangement made it a little hard to recognize, and the lyrics had been swapped out for religious ones, but it was still an anime song! I struggled to contain my laughter, feeling as though my sides were about to explode as I listened to him play. To think that a little prank I pulled would come back to bite me like this.

“I’ve never heard that song before,” observed Sylvester.

“I would expect not,” the High Priest casually replied, which made Sylvester frown.

“What song was that? Who composed it?”

“...That is a secret.” The High Priest glanced my way, an arrogant grin spread across his face. I let out a quiet gasp. Sylvester, who was sitting next to me, raised an eyebrow, his green eyes gleaming.

Gaaah! I don’t want you to publicize it, but don’t tease him like that either! Now he’s all interested, I can tell!

As a storm of panic ravaged me on the inside, Rosina returned with the small harspiel.

“Here you are, Sister Myne.”

“Thank you, Rosina.”

I strummed and chose to play a simple practice song I had learned. I made sure not to play one from my Urano days, as that would have been digging my own grave. *I sure have grown.*

“...You’re alright, but not that great.”

“I believe it is your turn to play, Brother Sylvester. I would like to hear your music.”

I was surrounded by the artistically gifted—Rosina, Wilma, and the High Priest—so I had no idea what was expected from an average noble. Now seemed like a good opportunity to figure that out by having Sylvester play.

“Heh. So you wanna hear my harspiel playing, huh? Alright, consider yourself lucky. I’ll play.”

Sylvester confidently picked up the harspiel, but judging by his behavior and attitude it was hard for me to imagine he was at all

musically inclined. Though as it turned out, looks can be deceiving. He was far more talented than I expected; he gently strummed away, his singing voice hitting all the right notes.

...Ngggh. Nobles are all way too high-level. I had been hoping for proof that the High Priest was asking too much of me, but in the end all I got was confirmation that nobles really were insanely skilled.

“Would you like to play as well, Lord Karstedt?”

“I’m not much of a harspiel player. Maybe if I had my flute, but I neglected to bring it.”

In a shocking twist, it seemed that even a buff military man like Karstedt could play an instrument, though he preferred to use an instrument that made use of the lung capacity he had built up through his training rather than one that just required him to strum thin strings.

Um, wow. That’s kinda cool.

“But far be it from me to sit and do nothing after everyone else has performed. Hm... I suppose the only thing I could perform here and now is a sword dance.”

“A sword dance?! I’ve never seen one of those. I would love to see yours, if you would.” Not even in my Urano days had I seen an actual sword dance. I looked up at Karstedt, my eyes sparkling with anticipation.

He called over Damuel with a nod, then took out his shining wand and murmured “*schwert*.” In an instant, the wand turned into a sword. The two men faced each other, lightly tapped the tips of their blades together, and then thrust them up into the air. That was the signal to start.

They both began cutting through the air, their deadly blades gleaming as they danced at an even tempo, moving fluidly and without any wasted energy.

Apparently the sword dance was used as a way of practicing the several different basic moves it was composed of, and it could be expected that everyone in the Knight’s Order was capable of executing it. But when performing it without rehearsing first as Karstedt and Damuel were, one had to carefully observe the other’s movements and their line of sight to move in unison. Falling out of sync was dangerous to them both.

Sweat was beading on Damuel’s forehead and his breathing was getting heavier. Noticing that, Karstedt pulled back his sword, a composed expression on his face.

“That should do it.”

“Amazing! Lord Karstedt, Sir Damuel, you’re both amazing! I was so scared one of you would get hurt, but you finished with aplomb!”

I continued to let loose a flood of compliments. But Sylvester

protested, saying he could do that much himself, and then immediately started sword dancing with Karstedt.

Um... Can I go back to my room now?

Sylvester looked pretty cool too as he performed the sword dance with a deadly serious expression. I could tell from their speed alone that this was a higher level sword dance than the last one, but really that just annoyed me.

“Heh. That was pretty cool, huh? Go ahead, lavish me with praise,” Sylvester crowed, his chest proudly puffed out.

The sword dance was over, and I could once again say from the very bottom of my heart that I found him annoying. So, so annoying. He was already back to his usual grade-school self, and any semblance of coolness and all my awe for him was blown away in an instant.

“...You were splendid, Brother Sylvester.”

“Wow, so monotone. Try again.”

He forced me to repeat my praise three times, at which point he was such a pain to deal with that I faked feeling sick just so I had an excuse to hurry back to the room I had been given.

Ambush

When morning came, the High Priest had an audience with Baron Blon where he would give him one of the smaller chalices. That was all we needed to do for farming towns under the rule of nobles. In the past when the temple had an excess of priests and shrine maidens, they were also sent to the farming towns of nobles. But the current mana shortage was so limiting that this was no longer the case, especially given that they had lent mana to other duchies as well.

Apparently, we only had to directly deliver the blessings of the large chalice to the chiefs of towns that gathered in collective winter homes in the Central District—that is, the land within the duchy ruled directly by the archduke and no other noble. The ruling nobles elsewhere could activate the smaller chalices themselves.

...If all nobles had mana and could fill up the smaller chalices, what was the point in the temple performing some excessively grand Offering Ceremony and then delivering the filled-up chalices to them? Even assuming there was some reason they were unable to fill them up themselves, why not just hand them out before the nobles returned to their provinces to save ourselves the effort of having to deliver them? It didn't make sense.

I acted like I understood, but on the inside I really didn't. In the end I just nodded and kept that to myself, figuring that there was probably an explanation behind why they did tedious work for apparently no reason.

Once the High Priest finished his meeting with Baron Blon, we spent the rest of the day flying around the grain-producing region of the Central District where the largest farming villages were. Then, after performing the Spring Prayer at five commoner winter mansions, we once again went to a farming town ruled by a noble and stayed the night. When morning came, the High Priest had an audience with the noble and handed over another chalice.

We went through the same Spring Prayer process the next day, and the day after that. Then, we were done with the farming towns in the District.

“Starting tomorrow, we will only be visiting the mansions of nobles,” the High Priest said with a somewhat grim expression.

We generally traveled on highbeasts while going through noble territory, but for some reason that was beyond my fathoming, we

would occasionally travel only by carriage. And when we were on our way to some noble mansions, we got into carriages a short distance away from the mansion to act as though we had been traveling by carriage the entire time.

In those cases, the High Priest told me to hide my face under the kind of veil worn by noble daughters, and when the bumpy carriage arrived at the mansion, only I, the High Priest, Fran, and Arno would go inside; Sylvester and the knights would stay behind in the carriages. I was worried that Sylvester would cause a fuss since he was always so eager for attention, but he would always wait in the carriage without protest.

“Viscount Gerlach’s mansion is our next destination, and we shall arrive by carriage. Let us be off,” said the High Priest as we rode atop our highbeasts. It was early in the morning and he had just delivered a chalice to a certain noble, and we were now speeding through the skies to catch up with the carriage that had left before us. He had explained that the carriages had magical tools within them that allowed the High Priest to detect their location from long distances.

We rendezvoused with the carriages without any issue. We always sat such that Karstedt and Sylvester were in one carriage while I was seated in another carriage with Damuel and the High Priest. That was apparently the best distribution for defensive and offensive purposes. Combat was entirely out of my wheelhouse, so I just took their word for it.

“Viscount Gerlach expressed great interest in you, Myne. He specifically asked for you to visit his land during the Spring Prayer, but know that he is quite close with the High Bishop. You would do well to be on guard around him.” The High Priest seemed to be pretty on edge, as he instructed me to pull the veil down to cover even more of my face than usual.

We were summoned to see Viscount Gerlach as soon as we arrived, so the High Priest, Arno, Fran, and I made our way to the mansion, leaving the carriages behind us.

“Aah, good Brother Ferdinand! Thank you for traveling so long a way to see me. Is this the apprentice shrine maiden I’ve heard so many rumors about?”

Perhaps due to confirmation bias, the man’s voice sounded sticky and nasty to me. I couldn’t see his face at all since I was kneeling and the veil was still covering my face. The most I could see out of the corner of my eyes was the bottom of his legs, but all that told me was that he seemed a little plump.

“You’ll be staying the night, yes?” he continued. “I welcome you readily!”

“Unfortunately, we are pressed for time and will be leaving

immediately. We shall be staying at Count Leisegang's residence tonight." The High Priest handed over the chalice, then cut the conversation short and left immediately. He had handled the entire process from start to finish, so it all ended without me even seeing Gerlach's face.

We departed from Gerlach's mansion before noon, but it wasn't until late that evening that we arrived at the summer mansion of Count Leisegang in the neighboring province. I had been traveling by highbeast so frequently I hadn't quite realized just how slow the carriages were by comparison. The High Priest said we were traveling by carriage because he didn't want us to arrive before our attendants had finished preparing our rooms, but judging by the way he kept looking behind us, I figured there was another reason.

Apparently Count Leisegang's province was larger than any other noble's in the duchy, but the building set aside for the priests who only visited twice a year was as small as we had grown accustomed to, and I slept in a room for servants once again. The High Priest had me drink one of his concocted potions for fear of what effect my exhaustion might have on my health and, as a result, I slept soundly until morning and woke up feeling great.

On that refreshing morning, the High Priest immediately called me to his room and passed over a sound-muting magic tool.

"Brigands entered Karstedt's room late last night," he said, but I was the only one who tilted their head in confusion. Everyone else wore grim expressions, seeming to suggest they knew already.

"Brigands? Like, thieves or something?"

"No, they were kidnappers looking for you," explained Karstedt. "It was two men, and they tried to leave the second they saw that the bump in the bed was too big to be you. I jumped out of bed on the spot and tried to capture them, but..." Karstedt trailed off and looked at me like it was hard for him to say what had happened next.

"Did they get away from you?"

"No. I caught one and left him to Lord Ferdinand, then tailed after the other from a distance, thinking I would glean what information I could. There were horses in the forest east of the mansion, and he raced away on one. I summoned my highbeast and went to pursue him, but the second I did, he exploded along with his horse."

"...Bwuh?" My mind rejected the last part of his sentence, not wanting to understand it. He exploded along with his horse? It just didn't make sense.

Sylvester, seeing that I had frozen in place, continued. "And the man Karstedt caught killed himself while Ferdinand was disarming him. When the one who got away died from an explosion, everything was over."

“I thought about not informing you, but as you are their target, I decided it would be best that you are aware of the situation,” said the High Priest. “Given that they knew where you were staying, we can conclude that Viscount Gerlach is behind this. Myne, be on your guard.”

He had declared the culprit flat-out in such an authoritative tone. I slowly looked around at all those gathered, holding a hand against my chest as if to contain the fear and anxiety coursing through me.

“...Is there no chance that Count Leisegang is the culprit?” I asked, but Karstedt shot the idea down with a firm shake of his head.

“No chance at all. They are family on my mother’s side; they would never bring harm to anyone accompanying me.”

We finished a hard-to-eat breakfast, then departed from Leisegang’s mansion. Our next night would be spent in the province at the very southern end of the duchy. We sent our carriages in that direction, then spent the morning and afternoon visiting one noble mansion after another.

“Now, let us rejoin with the carriages.”

We finished our business with no problem at all, and the High Priest turned his highbeast to the road so that we could catch up to our carriages heading for the duchy’s southern tip.

After a minute of flying, a red beam of light shot directly up into the sky. Everyone’s expressions changed—that was the red light the Knight’s Order used to call for aid.

“Ambush!” roared Karstedt, speeding up his highbeast in an instant. His griffon shot straight for where the red light had come from.

“Follow us!” yelled the High Priest as he soared past us on his lion.

Panicking at the thought of being left behind, I turned to look at Damuel with my hands on the reins. “Sir Damuel, we must hurry as well!”

“...I don’t have the amount of mana needed to go that fast.”

“Then use mine.” I tightened my grip on the reins, desperate to get going, and immediately felt my mana flow out of me. The winged horse’s speed shot right up.

“Thanks!”

The road weaved between a forest and rolling plains, and after a moment I could see a group of carriages at the edge of my vision. Inside were Fran, Rosina, Hugo, and Ella... but the carriages were surrounded by some strange black mist.

“What’s that black stuff?!” I called out to Damuel. We had finally caught up to the others, but we were moving so fast that they

probably couldn't hear me.

"That's a God of Darkness barrier. It drains mana, so magic-based attacks do nothing to it. The fact the ambushing force can make something like that means they must have nobles with them. Attacking at all will be hard until we figure out what kind of mana we're dealing with," said Damuel, his voice worryingly tense.

It was then that about a hundred weapon-wielding people—farmers, maybe—surged out from the forest and rushed toward the carriages. The very thought that Fran and the others were in danger made my head go blank, and I had Damuel pull on the reins to bring the highbeast I was riding up next to the High Priest.

"High Priest! If your magic won't work on the carriage, please use it to knock out those men instead!"

"Wait! Those might be citizens of this duchy, y'know?!" Sylvester protested with a stunned look, but I just gave him the hardest glare I could. Those thugs were trying to hurt people I cared about; I didn't care who they were.

"Fran and Rosina are way more important to me than they are! I just have to pray to the gods to make magic happen, right?!" I thought about which god I should pray to as I started to unleash the mana pent up inside of me. It flowed through and started to fill my body, making my ring and bracelet shine.

"Ferdinand!" Sylvester roared. "Stop her before it's too late!"

"Nothing can stop her now!" the High Priest shot back.

"Nothing?! We have no idea how many will die if she launches an attack with that much mana! It'll be a declaration of war if her attack crosses the duchy border! At the very least, buy me enough time to strengthen the border barrier!"

"She cannot be stopped, but we can influence the direction of her rampage," the High Priest said quietly. He brought his lion closer to our winged horse and looked at me. "Myne! If you wish to protect Fran and the others, pray to the wind!"

Since I hadn't yet decided on a god to pray to, the image of Wilma's Goddess of Wind sprung to mind, accompanied by the research I had done myself.

Schutzaria the Goddess of Wind was the Goddess of Autumn. Once the Goddess of Spring was dispersed, it was she who protected her little sister, the Goddess of Earth, as the God of Life regained his strength. She held back the God of Life and his ice and snow with her shield of wind until the harvest was over. Unlike the Goddess of Water who washed away the snow and ice that imprisoned the Goddess of Earth, she could be called a goddess specialized in defense and protection. She was the perfect one for me to pray to right now.

I glared at the line of carriages covered in black mist, then inhaled

deeply. ...*I'll protect Fran and the others no matter what!*

"O Goddess of Wind Schutzaria, protector of all. O twelve goddesses who serve by her side..."

I began my prayer by saying her name and could instantly feel the mana swelling within me take shape—power meant to protect what's important to me, not attack my foes, flowed from my entire body to my left arm, where it began to stir like a whirlpool.

"Myne! Form the shield over the God of Darkness barrier, so that your mana isn't consumed!" warned the High Priest.

I gave a small nod while keeping my eyes on the mist beneath me. Thanks to the prayers I had been forced to memorize for rituals, the words flowed easily out of my mouth.

"Please hear my prayer and lend me your divine strength. Grant me your shield of wind, so that I might blow away those who mean to cause ill."

The yellow feystone on the bracelet the High Priest had given me shone the brightest, for it was the divine color of Schutzaria the Goddess of Wind. My mana surged, turning into dazzling bright light and shooting straight for the carriages. I imagined a large dome covering the black barrier but not touching it, as suggested by the High Priest, and the mana moved according to my thoughts like paint on a brush. A sharp metallic sound filled the air and the round dome was complete. From above, it looked like the carriages and black mist were trapped within a divine shield carved into clear amber.

"Hyaaaaah!" The armed men continued pressing forward, perhaps not noticing the new barrier or perhaps being too caught up in their charge to stop. The ones at the front were the first to hit the barrier. They were immediately knocked back by strong winds, sending them all flying.

"Ngh?!"

"Wh-What was that?!"

Some had been thrown back several meters, others had fallen backwards and sent the people behind them toppling over like dominoes. They looked at the shield of wind in confusion, having no idea what had just happened.

"...It's magnificent," said Karstedt with somewhat widened eyes as he watched from above. His opinion of the shield protecting Fran and Rosina matched mine entirely.

"Right?! You think so too, Lord Karstedt?! I would expect nothing less from Schutzaria the Goddess of Wind's shield! Prayers of gratitude to the goddess who protected Fran and Rosina!"

"That's enough praying from you!" Sylvester yelled angrily the second I threw up my hands in excitement over the shield, which was much more powerful than I had anticipated.

...But wasn't it important to pray to and thank the gods after they had lent me their power? I kept that thought to myself and peered down to see the armed men charging the shield once more. They were blown away by the strong winds once again, knocking over the people behind them as they flew back. It took a few more charges before they finally stopped trying.

"I just sensed mana in the forest," said Damuel, sending everyone looking his way. His sensing mana meant that someone had tried to use it to interfere with the wind shield, or to otherwise protect someone from the rampaging winds. I had been told that it was hard for those with a lot of mana to detect amounts much smaller than their own; Damuel as a laynoble could sense it, but nobody else felt any mana being used in the forest.

Everyone's expressions hardened, and the High Priest gave his orders while looking at us one by one. "Sylvester, Karstedt, and I will go search the forest. Damuel, you stay here in the air and protect Myne!"

"Yes, sir!" Damuel gave a firm nod, but Sylvester yelled "No!" and shook his head.

"Damuel, come here a little!" said Sylvester before suddenly standing up on the High Priest's lion. Then, so nimbly it seemed almost unnatural, he leapt toward our winged horse's widely stretched out wings.

"Gyah?! What are you doing?! That's dangerous!"

Perhaps due to being made out of stone, the winged horse didn't shake or falter at all from Sylvester landing on its wing. He walked this way at a speedy pace, keeping his arms stretched out to maintain balance.

"You're in the way," exclaimed Sylvester as he stuck his hands under my armpits, raising me up high and swinging me side to side. I had no idea what was happening as the world shook around me; all I could do was blink.

He then yelled "Ferdinand, catch!" and before I knew it, he had thrown me at the height of one of his swings. Into the empty air, that is.

"...Um?"

I had been thrown into the air with no time to prepare myself. I just stared at the sky in front of me, unblinking. There was no point in me reaching out my arms, since there was nothing for me to grab on to. All I could see was the big blue sky stretching in every direction.

"Apprentice?!"

In slow motion, I saw Damuel stretching out his hands for me, seeming just as shocked as I was while Sylvester jumped over his head to sit behind him.

For an instant after being thrown I floated in the air, but gravity soon got its grip on me and I started to fall. My hair slapped my face as the wind rushed around my body, and the sudden pain knocked me back to my senses. I gasped, realizing that I had been thrown on a cordless bungee jump without any concern for my safety or emotional well-being.

“GYAAAAAAAAAH!”

“There we go.” The High Priest moved his highbeast and caught me, having predicted from Sylvester’s throw where I would fall. I probably hadn’t fallen more than a meter, but it felt like a hundred to me.

Being thrown into the empty air with no way of saving myself had been so scary that I instinctively clung to the High Priest for protection. But even though he had caught me, my body still trembled helplessly in fear.

“Th-That was... terrifying...”

“I would imagine so.” The High Priest patted my back comfortingly as I clung to him. But hearing the source of my terror, Sylvester, speak again sent my body trembling.

“Ferdinand, you stay here! Whoever’s in the forest might be a decoy!”

“Very well.”

“The border is close. We’ll catch them before they escape. Come, Karstedt!”

“Sir!” Karstedt gave a short response, and they both flew to the forest on their highbeasts.

The High Priest spoke in a quiet voice while watching them go. “What he did was reckless, but it was a decision founded in logic prioritizing your safety. Forgive him, for me.”

“Wha?”

“Those in the forest do not have much more mana than Damuel. It is ideal for him to be there to detect their location. Furthermore, if the casters there are indeed a decoy, it would be dangerous to leave you and Damuel on your own.”

The High Priest scanned our surroundings without letting his guard down for a moment. I could tell that I really was in danger, and that now wasn’t the time for me to be quivering in fear.

“Myne, could you pray with me for their success in battle?” The High Priest pointed out something we could do while staying protected in the air, and I responded with a small nod. Doing something to help would distract me from how scared I was.

Once the High Priest taught me the words to the prayer, we chanted it together.

“O God of War Angriff, of the God of Fire Leidenschaft’s exalted

twelve, we pray that you grant them your divine protection.”

The bracelets the High Priest and I were wearing shone with blue light, beams of which shot from the blue feystones on them. They spiraled around each other, shooting toward where the others had gone.

Sylvester swung his shining wand over the forest and sent a large red bird flying away from him. I watched on, thinking it looked a lot like a phoenix, and saw it spread its wings wide before seemingly melting into thin air. A transparent red wall seemed to appear from where the bird had spread its wings. Then, a yellow, equally large bird shot out of his wand as well, spinning in the air while crumbling and sending shining powder raining down beneath it.

Karstedt had turned his shining wand into a two-handed broadsword at the same time the red bird had become a wall. The massive blade shone with all the colors of the rainbow, and he swung it while roaring a battle cry.

“GRAAAAAAAAAAH!”

Dazzling light blasted out of his sword and shot right down into the forest.



“Bwuh?!”

An impossibly loud, ear-shattering sound shook the air as if a meteor had crashed into the earth, a feeling only strengthened by the ground shaking like an earthquake. The explosion that happened in the next instant destroyed an entire part of the forest and I felt the amount of mana within me plummet, perhaps due to shielding the carriages from the force of the blast.

“That was too much...” murmured the High Priest, knocking me back to my senses.

I looked up at him. “The carriages! Are the carriages okay?!”

“They seem to be entirely unharmed, thanks to the dual barriers of Darkness and Wind.”

“Wh-Whew,” I sighed in relief at having protected the carriage. But my anxiety was quickly replaced by a heavy dizziness, and I had to grab the High Priest’s chest to stop myself from falling.

“Is something wrong, Myne?”

“The moment I learned everyone’s safe, all my strength left me. Now I’m a little cold.”

When I told him that I was weakening and feeling cold, the High Priest looked at me with confusion and placed a hand on my neck.

“You are fairly cold now. Did you perhaps use too much mana?”

“...Huh? Oh, maybe.” Now that I thought about it, I had felt something similar to this after performing my first offering. Back then I had been able to recover by letting the mana within me flow through my body a little. I tried to do that again, but it seemed I had used almost all of my mana making the wind shield on top of performing all those Spring Prayer rituals. Up until now I had always been forcing my excess mana into a box within me; this was my first time just straight-up not having enough. I had no idea what to do.

“High Priest, I don’t have any mana left. I don’t have enough to circulate through my body,” I explained, which made the High Priest double-take with a look of disbelief in his eyes.

“You, out of mana? The only potions I have that could help with something that severe are in the carriages. We cannot retrieve them until we can confirm it is safe. For now... Drink this. It is something of a last resort, but it is better than nothing.”

The High Priest took a thin test tube-looking golden decoration out from his belt and pressed a small, round stone on it. The top of the test tube opened up.

He handed it to me, and a quick sniff revealed that the awful-tasting medicine wasn’t inside. I gulped it down and found a sweet-tasting liquid spreading through my mouth. Thinking back, it tasted a lot like the potion he had made me drink before using the memory-

searching magic tool. That stuff was a bit thicker, but they tasted largely the same. And they both made me sleepy, too.

“Close your eyes and let sleep take you. When you wake up, it will be time for a lecture and the potion you hate so much.”

I bobbed my head in a nod, then shut my eyes.

“Sister Myne, have you awoken?”

“...Rosina.”

I woke up to Rosina peering at my face, as if watching to make sure I had slept well. Upon noticing her I slowly sat up in bed, only for my head to immediately spin as though I had lost a lot of blood. I let my head fall back onto my pillow.

“You mustn’t move so suddenly. You pushed yourself dangerously far to protect the carriages from harm, correct? The High Priest was quite exasperated with you.”

“I am well prepared for whatever lecture he intends to give, as he warned me about it before I fell unconscious. More importantly, are you okay, Rosina? Is everyone else okay? Were any of you harmed or put through any suffering?”

I wondered whether I had done my job and successfully protected everyone. I didn’t even want to consider that I might have ended up using all my mana and collapsing for no reason, and was about to suffer through a lecture and a disgusting potion for nothing. It’d just be sad.

“Everyone is quite alright. Nobody was harmed, and nothing was damaged or stolen.”

“Really? That’s such a relief.” I sat back in bed, and listened as Rosina explained what had happened in the carriages.

The carriages were forced to a sudden stop when black darkness enveloped them. Everyone inside looked out the windows, and were shocked when they saw armed farmers appearing out of the forest. They readied themselves for the assault, only for the attackers to be knocked back by something. Then a sudden light pierced the air and they heard yells and a massive explosion, but since not even a rush of air touched the carriage, they had no idea what had happened. It was only when the High Priest and the others arrived afterward that they learned they had been saved.

“You suffered the most, Sister Myne. Only you fell unconscious, and went cold to the touch. You wouldn’t stop trembling,” explained Rosina as my consciousness faded for the second time.

“...In general, when farmers are weighed up against gray priests, it is the ones who produce food and pay taxes who come out on top. We were only saved because of you, Sister Myne. I thank you ever so much.”

The next time I woke up, the High Priest brought me the disgusting potion to drink. He held out the small bottle containing a familiar green liquid toward me. "Drink this."

"Eek..."

I tried to pull away, but as I was stuck in bed there wasn't anywhere I could go. The High Priest gave me a sharp glare for recoiling from the potion despite knowing I had no choice but to drink it.

"Has any of your mana returned yet?"

"...Not yet."

"I figured as much. But we cannot stay here forever. Do you need me to pinch your nose and force you to drink it?"

We couldn't leave until my mana had recovered, and if my lack of mana was making me a burden on everyone then I really did have no choice but to drink the potion, no matter how disgusting and nasty it was. I took the potion from the High Priest's outstretched hand and drank it, my hands shaking in terror.

"Ngh— Uuggghh!" I writhed on the bed, clasp my hands over my mouth as tears formed in my eyes from how awful it tasted.

The High Priest looked down at me and nodded with satisfaction. "Continue holding your mouth shut and listen until the potion takes effect," he began, before going on to explain the shocking truth that they had absolutely no idea who had set up the God of Darkness barrier or organized the attack. As unbelievable as it sounded, Karstedt's attack had reduced the enemy to nothing but dust, leaving them with no avenue to probe deeper. They couldn't even be sure that Gerlach was involved.

All they did know was that there were two of them and that, as Damuel had been able to sense them, whoever launched the attack didn't have much mana. They weren't strong enough to make a God of Darkness barrier themselves, meaning they must have had nobles helping them, and they predicted that it was likely a noble from another duchy.

"How do you know that?"

"More than half of those who attacked the carriages were not citizens of our own duchy."

He wouldn't tell me how they could identify their citizenship, but regardless, the Darkness barrier had likely been put in place by a noble from another duchy, who had fled back across the border to his own duchy before Karstedt unleashed his attack.

"...Wasn't he trying to capture the culprits?"

"It seems that he attacked with his normal strength, but the blast ended up stronger than he expected."

Karstedt himself was more surprised with the force of the attack than anyone. The High Priest glanced away uncomfortably, which was enough for me to guess what had been the problem.

“...Were our prayers unnecessary?”

“Perhaps. Do not speak of them unless asked to do so.”

“Okay.”

He then told me that Sylvester and Karstedt had already returned to the city. They had returned via highbeast, since this incident needed to be reported and processed for immediate investigation.

“It’s usually unthinkable for carriages carrying priests to be attacked, right? So they need to report this to the archduke and have him investigate?”

“...More or less.” The High Priest nodded, then hardened his expression. He looked down at me with cold eyes as I wiggled into a better sitting position.

“Myne, do you truly wish to stay with your family?”

“Of course I do.”

“Then why did you allow yourself to lose control of your mana yet again?” he asked, and I gasped with realization.

“I was just so worried about Fran and Rosina, I just... I wasn’t thinking.”

“The situation ended without incident because you focused your rampaging mana on making a powerful shield, but you still marked yourself as a dangerous threat once again. And above all else, although you ended up fine, that was only because you had a magic tool, prayed to the gods, and activated a spell. Had you not done all of those, your uncontrolled mana would have killed you.”

In general, magic tools were necessary for releasing one’s mana. That was the reason why Devouring children without magic tools died as their mana grew along with them and ate them alive. I had survived by offering mana in the temple, but had no idea whether my body would last if I forgot myself and let my mana go on a rampage.

“Do you know exactly what happens to those who die from losing control of their mana?”

The High Priest went on to explain in excessively precise detail exactly how nobles who let their mana go on a rampage died. The scariest part was his dry tone.

“First, the mana begins to leak from their bodies until eventually it all bursts out at once. At that point their body can no longer endure as a vessel for mana. Their skin begins to swell and bubble—indeed, quite similar to how boiling water might bubble. But it is when the skin can no longer hold back the mana that it all bursts, sending flesh and bl—”

“Gyaaah! Gyaaah! Gyaaah! I can’t hear you! I don’t want to hear

you! Nooooooooo!" I clapped my hands over my ears and threw the blanket over my head, but the High Priest ripped it away and pulled my hands off of my ears.

"Contain yourself, Myne. I have not finished."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I won't ever do it again! I'll never lose control of my mana again, so please, forgive me! I don't wanna bubble! I don't wanna explode! Stooooop!" I prostrated myself on the bed, sobbing tears of genuine terror.

The High Priest gave a light nod. "Very well then. The next time you lose control of your mana, I shall tie you to a chair such that you cannot cover your ears or escape, then have you listen to every word as I finish my explanation."

Envisioning myself tied to a chair and being forced to listen to terrifying explanation after terrifying explanation, I shook my head hard and desperately tried to make those thoughts go away.

"It won't happen again! I promise!"

The sincerity in my tone made the High Priest flash a smile. "I think I will be able to use this elsewhere," he murmured, sending a frightened chill down my spine.

The Wild and Uncontrollable Blue Priest

Once I had recovered, the Spring Prayer continued with us visiting the remaining noble mansions. Nothing particularly out of the ordinary occurred, and we all got back to the temple safely.

“Welcome back, Sister Myne,” said Wilma with a warm smile.

“I see you didn’t mess up or anything!” Delia added.

“Thank you both for watching my chambers while I was gone. How is everyone?”

Delia and Wilma welcomed me as I returned to my chambers, and a sense of relief washed over me. I felt as though I was back to where I was meant to be.

Fran and Gil began unloading the luggage packed in the carriages while I changed from my noble traveling clothes to my normal shrine maiden robes—with Delia’s assistance, of course.

“I’ll get a bath ready for you once the water heats up.”

“Thank you, Delia.”

Delia, Wilma, and Rosina were all working hard to unpack and organize the luggage being brought in, but it was piling up much faster than they could unpack it. My chambers were quickly becoming just as messy as they had been before I left.

“Sister Myne, my sincerest apologies, but the High Priest is calling for you on urgent business. It seems to be about you returning home,” said Fran, a tinge of worry in his voice. He had taken a momentary break from moving luggage and power walked up the stairs to where I was.

I had been worrying about when I would finally be able to go home now that Spring Prayer was over, so hearing that the High Priest wanted to talk to me about exactly that made me jump from my chair with joy.

“I shall depart at once.”

“Rosina, please accompany Sister Myne. I must continue unloading her luggage.”

On the way down I saw Fran and Hugo carrying luggage together, having seemingly gotten closer over the journey. Ella, perhaps due to her experience carrying heavy pots as a chef, had strong arms and could easily manage even my heavy bags. Gil was surprisingly strong for his size too, maybe thanks to him eating more food and doing

manual labor in the workshop and forest.

“I shall be departing for the High Priest’s room,” I announced. “I leave my chambers in your care, everyone.”

Outside the entrance to the noble section of the temple, a line of carriages was still being unloaded. The gray priests in the workshop were helping too, and I saw a familiar face from the workshop walking by holding a large box.

“I have returned. How fares the orphanage?” I asked, and after blinking in surprise, the gray priest gave a small smile.

“Welcome back, Sister Myne. The children have grown much. They will be overjoyed to see you at the orphanage again.”

“I will be overjoyed as well.”

The gray priests moved to the side to give me space. I nodded my thanks to them and walked quickly so as to minimize my interruption of their work.

“You called, High Priest? Wait... Brother Sylvester?”

“There you are, Myne.” Sylvester was lounging about in the High Priest’s room like he owned the place, lying on the bench and munching on the fruit placed on the table for visitors.

Meanwhile, the High Priest was completely ignoring him, giving instructions to the gray priests who were carrying his luggage.

“Um, High Priest. I was told you called for me,” I said.

The High Priest turned around, a thoroughly exhausted expression on his face, and asked me to sit down. I nodded and followed him over to the table.

The moment I sat down, Sylvester leaned forward toward me. “I’m the one who called for you. I wanna take a look around and you seem like just the girl for the job, Myne. Be my guide.”

“...What in the world do you mean by that?” I looked up at the High Priest for an explanation, but before he could reply, Sylvester answered in exasperation.

“What else is a guide gonna do but guide me? First, to the orphanage. Then, your workshop. I also need to take a look at this forest the orphans are going to,” he said casually.

I reflexively tensed up. Not a single blue priest had shown any interest in the orphanage or the workshop before now; even the High Priest had only ever heard about them through reports, having never actually visited the places himself. Furthermore, Sylvester had appeared from nowhere and I had no idea what he was thinking.

I subconsciously clutched onto the High Priest’s robe.

“You may calm yourself, Myne. I will be coming to the orphanage and workshop as well. I have long thought it would be wise to see the changes you’ve made myself.”

I put a hand against my chest in relief. Sylvester probably

wouldn't cause too much trouble with the High Priest holding his reins.

"As for the forest, however..." the High Priest continued. "The forest in the Noble's Quarter should suffice for you." He glared at Sylvester as he spoke, the exhaustion from our journey clear on his face.

"Nah, I'm going to the forest. I'm gonna check out her restaurant too." Sylvester continued to list each place he intended to visit.

"The restaurant is not finished; I believe I mentioned that the chefs are still in training. But more importantly—High Priest, are blue priests even allowed to go to the lower city's forest?"

Going directly to the Italian restaurant in a carriage was one thing, but I had never before heard of any blue priests going to the lower city's forest. There was a forest by the Noble's Quarter that only nobles were allowed to enter. It had overseers, and any commoner wandering in from outside the city would be killed with impunity. If Sylvester wanted to go to a forest, he could just go to the nobles' forest like the High Priest said.

"I'm interested in seeing what a commoner's forest is like. It'll be fine; most people in the lower city won't even recognize us as nobles. And I can protect myself from anyone who does, no problem." Sylvester then slapped his flexed bicep, wearing a confident grin. I could tell he was enthusiastic, but letting him do what he wanted would definitely backfire on us.

...High Priest, I'm counting on you to hold him back. I silently pinned all my hopes on the High Priest, but he just looked at me while rubbing his temples, as if containing a headache.

"...Fine, do as you wish. Myne, all I ask is that you report exactly what he does."

In sharp contrast to Sylvester's seemingly boundless energy, the High Priest was exhausted, looking like he didn't want to think about anything anymore. I looked between the two of them, confused; before I knew it, I had been assigned to be Sylvester's guide.

I feel like "babysitter" would be a more accurate way to describe it, really.

"You two may leave."

The High Priest wanted us gone, but I tightened my grip on his sleeve. Why had I come here if not to hear about going home? It certainly wasn't to have guide duty forced on me.

"High Priest, I was told you wanted to talk about me going home. When may I leave the temple?"

The High Priest's eyes wavered before he looked down at me. "Yes, well... You only recently expended an enormous amount of mana. Your family would have no means of helping you if you were to

collapse. Rest here for three days, and if you haven't fallen ill by the fourth day then you may leave that morning. Inform your family of this. Also, do us all a favor by resting well today."

"Okay!" I gave an enthusiastic response before moving to leave the room with Rosina. For some reason Sylvester stood up too, along with the gray priest behind him who was probably an attendant.

"Alright. Let's get going, Myne."

"Brother Sylvester?"

"Come to my room."

"Um... But I must rest...?" I looked back to the High Priest for help, but he simply shrugged and juted his chin toward the door, gesturing for us to leave. Sylvester happily obliged.

I had no escape. After sharing a defeated look with Rosina, I followed after him.

"C'mon, it's this one."

It seemed that Sylvester's room was right next to the High Priest's. He opened the door for me and I found the inside was almost entirely barren. I felt it odd that his room had only the bare minimum of furniture; I would have thought that an overgrown elementary-schooler like Sylvester would have his room packed with stuff relating to his hobbies and tastes.

"Myne, I know you're taking the orphanage kids to the forest. Take me too if you don't want me to tell the High Bishop about everything." Sylvester wore a cocky grin as he attempted to blackmail me. Everyone in the temple knew that the High Bishop hated me, which was why no blue priest up until now had ever approached me.

I furrowed my brow, not understanding what Sylvester was thinking. "Why do you want to go to the forest anyway...?"

"To hunt."

I blinked in surprise at his answer. "To hunt? Where have you been hunting before now?" I still couldn't see why he would want to go to the lower city's forest.

"In the Noble's Quarter forest, of course."

"Then you can continue going there."

"That place is way too boring," Sylvester sighed, before going on to list every single problem he had with the nobles' forest. Not only did you need to have your hunt approved by the overseer ahead of time, you were only allowed in at a preassigned time. It wasn't somewhere you could just wander into when the mood struck.

Furthermore, there was a sizable hunting competition held there every year. Everyone's position was defined by their status in the noble hierarchy, and you had to hunt while making sure not to overstep the bounds of your strata. It was more of a place for nobles to flatter and butter up the archduke than to do any actual hunting.

Overall, the nobles' forest did sound like too rigid of a place for someone like Sylvester—a man with the heart of a little boy who wanted a genuine test of skill, honest praise, and a place he could run off to with his bow whenever he felt like hunting.

"I understand now, but you can hardly go to the lower city's forest in clothes that clean."

"Bring me some dirty clothes from the lower city, then."

"...I don't know how many people you intend to go with, but do you plan to make them all wear dirty clothes as well?"

It would be easy enough for me to buy cheap clothes in a secondhand store for them, but I had no idea how many sets of clothes he would need.

However, my question just made Sylvester look confused.

"What're you talking about?"

"I'm asking how many people you will be going with."

"Nobody. The temple's one thing, but I won't need any attendants in the lower city."

I looked between Sylvester and the gray priest attendant who was preparing tea for us. "...Does the High Priest know about this?"

"Why would I need Ferdinand's permission? You might be a commoner he took custody of, but I don't need anybody's permission." He punctuated his declaration with a firm "Anyone should know that."

I hung my head. Of course an adult blue priest wouldn't need to get permission from the High Priest for everything they did. That said, I did feel as though a person like Sylvester would need someone to constantly watch over them just as much as I did.

"Anyway, we'll go to the orphanage and workshop first. We'll do that the day after tomorrow."

"...Um, Brother Sylvester. Are you going to the orphanage to search for a shrine maiden to take flowers from?" I asked, unable to think of another reason why a blue priest would want to go to the orphanage.

Sylvester grimaced, his brows pushed together with disgust.

"Myne, kids like you shouldn't talk about that kind of thing. Want to start chirping 'pooey' again?"

"No. It's just, I *am* the orphanage director, so..."

I had considered stealthily hiding the shrine maidens old enough to offer flowers if Sylvester intended to seek them out, but judging by his reaction it was hard to think that was his aim. That was all I needed to know.

"Do you think I'm so starved for women that I'd need to search the orphanage for one?"

"Bwuh? I thought that was a normal thing for blue priests to do." I

had always assumed that they settled for the nearby gray shrine maidens because they so rarely left the temple, but maybe I was wrong. I tilted my head, curious.

Sylvester bit his lip for a second, then coughed. "...Men of my charisma and charm can find women in the Noble's Quarter too."

"I'm sure."

If it meant he wasn't going to go after the shrine maidens in the temple, I really didn't mind Sylvester bragging about how easily he could find girls in the Noble's Quarter. I promised to find him a pair of secondhand clothes and exited the room with Rosina.

Once I returned to my chambers, I called out to all of my attendants as they put away my luggage, gathering them together. I needed to tell everyone about Sylvester and the High Priest's plans.

"The day after tomorrow, the High Priest and a blue priest will be visiting the orphanage and the workshop."

"The day after tomorrow?!" they exclaimed in unison. Everyone looked very understandably surprised, aside from Delia, who didn't go to either place. That was simply too sudden for the plans of a noble; usually thorough preparations would be made and a warning given long in advance. But given that Sylvester had spoken the date himself, it would be safe to assume that it was set in stone.

"Please ensure that the orphanage and workshop are thoroughly cleaned. As for everything else, you may proceed as usual." We weren't doing anything in the workshop we didn't want other people to see. Not to mention that, knowing myself, trying to hide things would never end well. I might as well just be open from the start.

"Sister Myne, does a blue priest visiting mean that..." Wilma trailed off, her face pale.

I gently shook my head. "Don't worry, Wilma. Neither of them will demand an offering of flowers. They just want to see the workshop and the changed orphanage."

"I-I see." Wilma nodded, but looked no less anxious. In fact, she was now trembling. I felt awful for her, but Sylvester's mind had been made up. There would be no avoiding his visit to the orphanage.

"As much as I would like to say that you may stay in your room, as you have been entrusted with running the orphanage, you may be needed to answer any questions they may have."

"Understood." Wilma tightly laced her fingers in front of her chest, squeezing them together. I was disappointed in myself for not being able to do anything but watch her tremble.

"Gil, is Lutz or Leon in the workshop? If so, please call them over. It would be wise to inform the Gilberta Company of this visit."

"They're both there; I'll go see whether either of 'em are free," said Gil before turning around and leaving.

I moved to the hall on the first floor so that Lutz or Leon could join us while my other attendants started moving the empty boxes strewn about to the nearby male attendant rooms, freeing up space and making the place look more presentable.

“Heya, Myne. Good to see you back.”

“Lutz! It’s been so long!”

I ran up and gave Lutz a hug. I had been away from him longer than ever before thanks to the Spring Prayer.

“So much happened I don’t even know where to start,” I continued. “I’m exhausted.”

“Sounds rough,” said Lutz, but before I could go on a displeased voice sounded out from behind him.

“Can you leave that for later and explain why you called me over too?”

“Oh, you’re here too, Leon?”

“I’ve been here from the start.”

Leon was a Gilberta Company *leherl* who had been trained as a waiter by Fran over the winter. He was about to come of age, but since he was a little short he kind of came across like a younger kid trying to talk big for his age. And while there was no doubting his competence when it came to work, given that Benno had signed a *leherl* contract with him, he always got harsh whenever I tried healing my soul with Lutz, so I didn’t have the greatest opinion of him.

“I don’t have anything to talk to you about, Leon. Feel free to leave.”

Lutz patted my head. “Myne, relax. I’m guessing it’s something important to do with the Gilberta Company?”

I nodded and looked up at Leon, still clinging onto Lutz. “The day after tomorrow, the High Priest and a blue priest will be visiting the orphanage and the workshop. Please tell Benno about this. I’m sure he wants connections with the nobility, and the blue priest is interested in the Italian restaurant.”

“Understood.” Leon smoothly knelt down and crossed his arms in front of his chest. Despite being prickly whenever I was hugging Lutz, he was dedicated to his work.

“That’s all the Gilberta Company stuff I needed to talk about. The only thing left is a personal request I have for Lutz,” I explained.

Leon stood up. He shot one annoyed glance at me clinging to Lutz, then left after saying “I’ll go on ahead.”

“What’s your request?”

“Well, I’ve got to rest here for three days until I feel better, but the High Priest said I can go home on the fourth day as long as I don’t fall sick before then. Could you tell that to Mom and everyone else?”

“Sure. But man... that sure took a while, huh?” murmured Lutz, his voice wavering as he tried to hold back a flood of emotions while he endured my affectionate attack. I had only survived living away from my family for so long because Lutz and Tuuli had visited me so often, letting me hug them each time.

“Also, I want a pair of secondhand clothes, big enough to fit Deid. They’re for a muscular guy who’s a bit on the tall side.”

“...And who’s that?” asked Lutz. It was a natural question—one so natural that anybody else in the entire world would have probably asked too. But since I had no idea whether it would be wise to answer aloud, I stood on my tippy toes and stretched my back to whisper stealthily into Lutz’s ear.

“The blue priest visiting us the day after tomorrow.”

Lutz made an impossible to describe expression and then, after a minute of silence, let out a murmur. “He’s a weirdo, isn’t he...?”

“Yes. A big weirdo. He said he wants to go to the forest to hunt.”

Any blue priest who wanted to hunt in the lower city’s forest bad enough to wear dirty secondhand clothes was weird, plain and simple.

Lutz grimaced upon realizing that it’d be his job to take the priest to the forest, and honestly, I felt for him. It was a position I wouldn’t want to be in either.

“Well, no point crying over what’s done,” he sighed. “I’ll go clothes hunting tomorrow so it’ll all be ready for when the day comes.”

“Thanks, Lutz.”

With that conversation settled, Lutz started telling me about the progress that had been made on the printing press and Johann’s letter types while I was gone. The Myne Workshop had resumed making paper as well, so we had more on hand again.

“I want to start printing books again as soon as possible. Do you think the Ink Guild has started making our ink yet?” I asked. Even if you had all the paper in the world, you couldn’t print without ink, and if we needed to make our own we’d have to start by gathering soot again.

“Yeah. I heard from Master Benno that they’ve started hiring craftsmen just to make the plant paper ink. Oh, and there’s a new head of the Ink Guild.”

“I know that. The High Priest told me that the previous one died,” I said before falling silent and hugging Lutz tighter. There was no way I could tell him that nobles hunting for me had killed him.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nobles are scary.”

“Huh? Are you talking about the blue priest who’s coming over tomorrow?” Lutz asked, making me laugh. Sylvester was scary, but for

reasons completely different from the nobles hunting me.

“Kinda, since he’s a weird noble. It’s scary not knowing what he’s going to do next. When we first met, he poked my cheek and told me to ‘chirp pooey.’”

“The heck?”

I told Lutz all about the weird things Sylvester had done at our first meeting, then I talked about the things he had done over Spring Prayer.

Lutz listened while laughing, until eventually forming a mischievous grin and poking my cheek.

“C’mon, Myne. Try chirping it again.”

“Lutz, you big bully! Pooey!”

Visit to the Orphanage and Workshop

The day after returning to the temple from Spring Prayer, everyone cleaned the orphanage and workshop. The day after that, Sylvester and the High Priest were due to visit come third bell. Everyone was busy from the second that morning came.

“Sister Myne, got a second? Er, I mean, do you have a moment?”

“I certainly do, Gil. You’re making fine progress.”

Upon returning from Spring Prayer, I found that Gil had been slowly working on his speech in my absence. The gray priests who had formerly served as attendants were teaching the kids in the orphanage manners, and they would advise Gil on his language while in the workshop.

“Those kids keep on saying that since I’m an attendant, I need to hurry up and learn to talk better so I don’t embarrass you! Er... Ahem. I mean, I need to learn to talk more politely so as not to bring shame to you.”

I could appreciate that the kids wanted to try out the new way of speaking they had learned for themselves, but I could also understand why Gil was annoyed at them giving him a hard time.

“It is true that you would need to learn proper speech sooner or later to continue serving as my attendant. This is a good opportunity for you.”

“Sister Myne, I’m gonna work hard... I don’t want— Er, I don’t wish for you to replace me with someone else.” Gil knelt beside me and frowned, clearly frustrated at himself, but I didn’t understand where his fears were coming from at all.

“Hm? Wait a second, Gil. Why are you worried about that?”

“Because there are a lot of people here who are better than me,” he forced out, hanging his head sadly. He explained that a troublemaker like him who spent most of his time in the repentance chamber getting to be an attendant had motivated all the other kids to try and become my attendants too, since if someone like him could do it, there was no reason they couldn’t as well. He was worried that I would replace him, and was working hard to learn how to do things the other kids couldn’t.

...Is that why he’s been spending so much time in the workshop learning new jobs and treating Lutz as his rival?

I was sitting in a chair, which put me in the perfect position to pat Gil's head as he knelt. I reached out and stroked his light blonde hair.

"I know how hard you are working, Gil. I may take on new attendants when necessary, but I will never replace you."

"You really mean it...?" His expression softened with relief.

Attendants generally had very little job security; they could be replaced at the slightest whim of their master. But I had no intention of replacing Gil as long as he wasn't massively incompetent.

"By the way, did you not have something to talk to me about, Gil?"

"Right. Should we start working in the workshop even though the priests are going to come?"

"Yes. They would like to see what kind of work we are doing there. I do know that even my presence is enough to make everyone nervous, and I imagine that the High Priest himself visiting with another blue priest will be nerve-wracking beyond belief, but I ask that you give it your all today. Could you tell everyone that?"

"As you wish."

Fran and those from the Gilberta Company came in to see me not long after Gil left. There was Benno, Lutz, and Leon. Mark had stayed behind to keep the store running.

"Good morning, Sister Myne. It was an honor to receive your invitation on this fine day."

I guided the three of them to the second floor, then had Rosina and Delia go down to the first. It was understood that they would pretend not to hear us speaking casually after being cleared from the room.

"Here, Myne. I got the clothes you asked for. And some shoes, just in case."

"Thanks, Lutz." I took the bundled-up clothes and shoes from him; I would need to give these to Sylvester later. For now I put them on my desk and returned to the table.

Benno, wearing clothes appropriate for meeting nobles, looked at me with his eyes gleaming sharply. "So, what kind of noble is this other blue priest?"

"No idea."

"Seriously?" replied Benno with a glare. I knew he wanted as much information going into this as possible, but I couldn't help what I didn't know.

"Why would you expect me to know anything about Brother Sylvester's family?"

"Because you could've asked him. Learn to gather information for yourself, idiot."

It was true that a merchant would want to know all about a

customer's family, but what I wanted to know was how to avoid Sylvester entirely. Still, Benno would yell at me again unless I said something, so I tried remembering what I had learned over Spring Prayer.

"He's very weird. I've been told that although he has a rotten personality, he has something of a good heart buried deep within him."

"Look, I don't care about that. I need to know the size of his family, what connections they have, what kind of a presence he has, and other stuff that will help get my goods in his hands and his money in my pocket."

"Oh, right. My bad. I spent the whole trip trying as hard as I could to avoid him, so I don't know anything like that at all." I spoke from the heart without really thinking about it, and Benno slumped over in disappointment. "You can just learn this stuff for yourself when I introduce you to him at the workshop, Benno. That would be a lot more reliable than trusting me."

"Yeah, no point in expecting that much from you. I'll consider you not forgetting to introduce me as a big enough win. This is a lot better than you panicking over their visit and then not giving me a heads-up at all," said Benno, nodding to himself. The fact that I couldn't really dispute him made me a little sad about myself. "Right, I'll see you then. Try not to mess things up."

Benno, having obtained little in the way of information, departed with Lutz and Leon for the workshop.

Third bell started to ring while I was practicing the harspiel. I stood up, tense with anxiety, and after Fran grabbed the clothes Lutz had brought me, he took the lead walking outside. I walked behind him with Damuel beside me.

"Rosina, Delia, I entrust my chambers to you."

"As you wish, Sister Myne. We await your safe return."

When we arrived at the High Priest's room, we found him writing something on his desk with Sylvester lounging about nearby, ready to go.

"I apologize for the wait," I said.

"Sure," Sylvester replied. "Let's get going."

I couldn't understand why he looked as excited as someone heading off on an adventure or a quest of some kind. As far as I knew, visiting the workshop and orphanage probably wouldn't be all that much fun. Maybe he was excited to see the workshop because there weren't any in the Noble's Quarter.

"Brother Sylvester, before we leave... Here are the clothes you asked for, as well as some wooden shoes commonly worn in the lower

city, just in case.”

“You got those pretty fast, huh? Not bad.”

“They’re secondhand. There was no need to have them made to order or anything.”

Fran handed the clothes and shoes to Sylvester’s attendant, who took them with a conflicted expression.

I understand that you probably don’t want to be holding secondhand commoner clothes, but your master’s the one who requested them.

“You all, stay here. We’ll be fine with just Fran and Damuel tagging along. Having too many of you accompany us will just make the smaller rooms cramped,” Sylvester announced to Arno and his own attendants. The orphanage probably wouldn’t have been too bad, but the workshop would definitely get a bit cramped if too many of us went inside at once.

“There. Let us go.” The High Priest finished up his work, and with that we left.

Fran took the lead. Sylvester and the High Priest followed behind him, while Damuel and I trailed at the back.

Along the way to the orphanage, Sylvester seemingly ran out of patience for my slow walking. He spun around and pointed at me. “Damuel, snatch her up and walk. She’s the slowest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“...Could you at least phrase that as him embracing me in a majestic carry?”

“Normally a bodyguard should keep their hands free at all times, but I’m stronger than Damuel so that shouldn’t be an issue this time.”

Despite how it may have seemed, I was in fact doing my best to walk as fast as I could. The problem was that Sylvester and the High Priest were so tall that not even my running speed was enough to keep up with their brisk walking. Honestly it was kind of a relief when Damuel picked me up, since I had been running out of breath.

“This is the orphanage,” Fran said as he pushed open the creaky doors leading to the dining hall of the girls’ building.

Waiting for us inside was Wilma, two gray shrine maidens, and two gray priests, all of whom were kneeling. It was a bit hard to see them behind the adults, but the pre-baptism children were also gathered and kneeling. Benno had advised us not to have them working during the visit, since in the lower city it was generally forbidden to make pre-baptism children work.

“Welcome to our humble abode. We are honored beyond words by your visit.”

“High Priest, Brother Sylvester. This is my attendant Wilma. She manages the orphanage and takes care of the pre-baptism children all by herself.”

The High Priest raised an eyebrow and nodded to himself. "You are the one responsible for the excellent art in Myne's books, as I recall. Your efforts are commendable."

"I-I am honored," Wilma responded in a shaky voice, having not expected the High Priest to praise her; she had probably assumed that the High Priest would know nothing about a gray shrine maiden. Thanks to her hair being tightly bound behind her head, the fact she was blushing all the way up to her ears was readily visible.

"I thought the orphanage would be a mess with all the little kids, but I see it's actually pretty clean." Sylvester walked to the middle of the room and twirled as he looked all over.

"That's because everyone works hard to keep it clean," I answered, my chest proudly puffed out. The orphanage was kept so clean thanks to Wilma taking the lead in cleaning while instructing everyone on the importance of keeping the place where you eat clean.

"All the kids are as small as you, huh? There aren't any kids younger than this?"

"...Not right now."

There were no kids younger than those kids because they had been given no food or care and died as a result. Sylvester should have known that, and him playing dumb angered me, but yelling at him here wouldn't bring them back.

"More importantly, Brother Sylvester, please remember that I have in fact been baptized."

"That doesn't change that you're as small as them."

Despite the fact that I was probably shorter than many of them, once summer came it would be one full year since I was baptized. Sylvester ignored my puffed-cheek pouting and wandered over to the side of the dining hall, his interest seemingly piqued by the boxes stacked in the corner.

"Myne, what're these?"

"Those are books and toys for teaching kids to read. Everything there was made by the workshop, more or less."

Sylvester took out a children's bible and flipped through a few pages. He then looked at the karuta and playing cards with a frown.

The High Priest, who had been watching from the side, picked up a karuta pack and glared at me. "Myne, you did not inform me of these."

"Those are karuta. They're a useful toy for learning letters. I made them for one of my attendants who wanted to learn to read, then made more for the orphanage to use. They can't be commercially produced yet since Wilma has to manually draw the art for each card, so I didn't think reporting them would be relevant," I explained.

The High Priest fell into thought, a hand resting on his chin.

“...Just to confirm, you have not been commercially producing these?”

“Right. I did sell the rights to Benno, but I haven’t heard of him producing them yet.” Benno had said they would sell, but as far as I was aware he hadn’t actually made them into a product yet. Perhaps he was struggling to find an artist. “In any case, I read the bible to make these, and thanks to them I was able to learn the names of the gods and the divine instruments. The orphanage children are quite skilled at the game, having memorized both the text and art cards completely.”

“That so? I wanna see them in use. Come on.” Sylvester’s sudden demand sent the children nervously looking between me and Wilma. I had more or less predicted what Sylvester would say, so I calmly took the karuta and smiled at the kids.

“Shall I read the cards and you all do the rest, then?”

“As you wish, Sister Myne.”

The kids all looked tense due to the unfamiliar blue priest, but once they started focusing on the karuta their eyes grew more serious and the anxiousness melted from their faces.

“This child took the most cards, which means she won this game.”

“Good on you,” said Sylvester to the winner after hearing my explanation.

The High Priest, who had been watching the kids clean up the karuta cards, looked down at me. “Myne, you have these all memorized? And the children can read all of the text cards?”

“Yes. The orphanage children can all read the text cards as a matter of course, and they can even read the children’s bible. They learned over the winter.”

“...Over the winter? Seriously?” Sylvester’s eyes widened in shock.

I puffed out my chest again and gave a big nod. “Indeed. There is not much to do while snowed in over the winter, correct? The larger kids could help in the workshop, but the younger kids had little to do but spend their time reading and playing karuta. They know their numbers thanks to playing with the cards over there as well, and they can do a little math now.”

I described the impressive results of the winter school with my head held high, but for some reason the High Priest cradled his head.

“Myne...” he said, his voice heavy with exasperation despite the fact that Fran had for sure reported this to him before.

“What is it, High Priest?”

He paused for a moment, then sighed and said “It can wait.” His expression made it clear that he had mustered all of his willpower to swallow whatever it was he wanted to say.

...It feels like I've got a big lecture waiting for me, but why? Why? I cocked my head to the side in confusion just as Sylvester grabbed my

shoulder.

“Alright, take me to the workshop.”

“Certainly.”

Walking at my usual pace, I headed to the back exit, which was down the stairs of the girls’ building.

“Sister Myne, I do not believe we should bring a visitor there...” said Wilma in a troubled tone.

I snapped back to my senses, stopped where I was, and spun around. The back exit certainly was no place to bring a visiting guest. But my sudden change in direction seemed to make the two priests think I was hiding something from them, and their expressions hardened a bit as they looked at the stairs.

“Wait. What are you hiding down there?” asked the High Priest.

“It’s just a back exit we usually use to reach the workshop. But as you and Brother Sylvester are both visitors, I should take you there the proper way,” I explained. “I wasn’t thinking.”

The High Priest furrowed his brows. “...A back exit in the orphanage? I have never heard of such a thing.”

“Take us there.”

At their request, I followed Wilma down the stairs as I usually would. The basement of the girls’ building was a kitchen, and they were in the middle of preparing lunch. We could hear the girls chattering as nice smells drifted into our noses. But the talking stopped the second Wilma came into sight, hurrying down the stairs.

By the time the priests and I reached the kitchen, the large soup-filled pot had been abandoned mid-boil, and everyone was kneeling down by the wall.

“Huh, so this is where you’re making food for the orphans?”

“Yes. Though generally only soup is made here.”

I explained how we were filling the gaps between divine gifts with soup we made ourselves. The two priests had likely never even looked into their own kitchens, and both of them peered into the bubbling pot with great interest.

“This stuff looks like the soup we shared back during Spring Prayer.”

“That’s because I taught them the same recipe.”

Sylvester glared down at me with narrowed eyes. “Isn’t that a little much for orphans to be eating every day?”

That annoyed me. The orphans had been forced to earn money by themselves and cook their own food due to there being fewer blue priests and shrine maidens to offer them divine gifts. No way was some simple soup “a little much” for them. But of course, I couldn’t state my frustrations to a blue priest like Sylvester.

“Speaking of which, do they not make some kind of commoner

sweets here? I recall Damuel reporting something of the sort,” said the High Priest, making Sylvester’s eyes shoot wide open.

“Sweets?! Now that’s too much!”

“You say it’s too much, but unlike the sugar and honey that nobles can purchase themselves, the commoner sweets in question rely on fruit that can only be gathered on sunny winter mornings. They are not eaten every day. Furthermore, there are so many in the orphanage that each individual gets only a small portion. Although it is well worth it as a nice winter flavor. Isn’t that so, Sir Damuel?”

Damuel bobbed his head in a nod while looking between Sylvester and the High Priest, both of whom were staring daggers into him. Sylvester in particular glared with a particularly envious look in his eyes.

“You sure have had it nice here, huh, Damuel?”

“Only on a rare few occasions. I think there has been more suffering than anything here.”

Guarding me was hardly an easy job for someone like Damuel, who had a heart attack whenever I collapsed and struggled when archnobles were glaring at him like this.

“The soup will burn if we stay here, so I suggest we hurry on to the workshop.” I urged us toward the exit, since I didn’t want to deal with Sylvester asking to eat a parue cake. We then passed by the chapel as we made our way to the boys’ building.

“This is the Myne Workshop,” Fran stated as we entered. The boys inside stopped their work and moved to the wall where they knelt down just like the girls had, accompanied by the three from the Gilberta Company. “We have started producing plant paper now that it is spring again. Once we have a large supply of paper, we’ll start making more picture books.”

Those in the workshop seemed to have been swishing pulp and drying the paper since they couldn’t go to the forest today.

Sylvester looked around, then gave a snort. “Myne, where are you making those toys?”

“Those were made over the winter. It’s past their time now. We could easily make more if we ordered the materials, but our priority here is making paper for picture books,” I explained.

Sylvester blinked his deep green eyes in confusion. “Why focus on the paper and picture books when the toys are more fun and would sell better?”

“Because I want books.” Was there anything wrong with using my own workshop to make the things I wanted? No. I wanted books regardless of whether they would sell or not. The Myne Workshop existed for that very purpose.

Sylvester’s jaw dropped, as though he couldn’t believe what he

was hearing. “Man... You sure do whatever you want, huh?”

“Um, I don’t want to hear that from you, Brother Sylvester.” Nobody embodied the concept of doing whatever you wanted more than Sylvester did.

As both Sylvester and I stared at each other in disbelief, the High Priest rubbed his temples. “The truth remains that both of you are a source of endless headaches for me.”

“Ngh...”

“Anyway, Myne. I wanna see the workshop actually running. Everyone! Get back to work.” Unlike me, Sylvester ignored the High Priest’s barbed words and instead ordered the gray priests to return to their work. They all smoothly stood up and went back to their positions. There was no denying it—Sylvester was wilder and more uncontrollable than I was.

With the gray priests back at work, only the three from the Gilberta Company remained kneeling by the wall.

“The High Priest already knows these three, but I will introduce them to you, Brother Sylvester. This is Benno from the Gilberta Company, and his leherl apprentices Lutz and Leon.”

“Right, the merchant that sells the stuff from here.” Sylvester, who was glancing at the now-moving workshop, looked down at Benno and the others.

“Correct. Most everything made in the Myne Workshop is sold through the Gilberta Company. The restaurant you’re interested in is also being established by the Gilberta Company. They would love to have your business.”

“Oh yeah? Benno, raise your head. I permit you to speak to me.”

“I am honored,” said Benno as he looked up. Then, all of a sudden he froze. No words of greeting passed his lips, and I heard him swallow hard.

“Benno?” I asked, confused.

“Blessed be the waves of Flutrane the Goddess of Water who guided us toward this meeting,” Benno choked out before lowering his head again.

Sylvester, looking down at him with a contemplative hand on his chin, grinned.

Why does he look like a carnivore that just found some new prey?

“Benno, that restaurant you’re making sounds pretty interesting. I’ve been wanting to have a nice, long discussion about it for a while now. Let’s go to another room and make that a reality. Follow me.”

“Understood,” replied Benno, standing up shakily. He looked so ill that I instinctively called out to Sylvester.

“Brother Sylvester, remember your promise not to steal our chefs.”

“...The thought didn’t even occur to me. This is just a business

discussion.”

“Good, then.”

Business discussions were Benno’s specialty; there was no need for me to get in the way.

“Myne, what manner of machine is this?” asked the High Priest, drawing my attention away from Sylvester, who was taking Benno away. He was looking at the normal press we were turning into a printing press.

“This is a new printing press. It is not quite done yet, but it is looking a lot more complete than it was before I left for Spring Prayer. I cannot wait for when it is finished.”

“How is it used? I received a report on it from Damuel, but it was rather hard to understand.”

To answer the High Priest’s question, I called Gil over and decided to demonstrate the process. “Gil, please prepare the ink. High Priest, these are called metal letter types, and you line up the letters to form the text.”

“...Letter types? They look like tiny stamps.”

As the High Priest looked over a letter type in his hands, I had Fran fetch the types for me so I could organize them into a short sentence. Gil then put those into the forme, locking them in place by sliding in boards on either side.

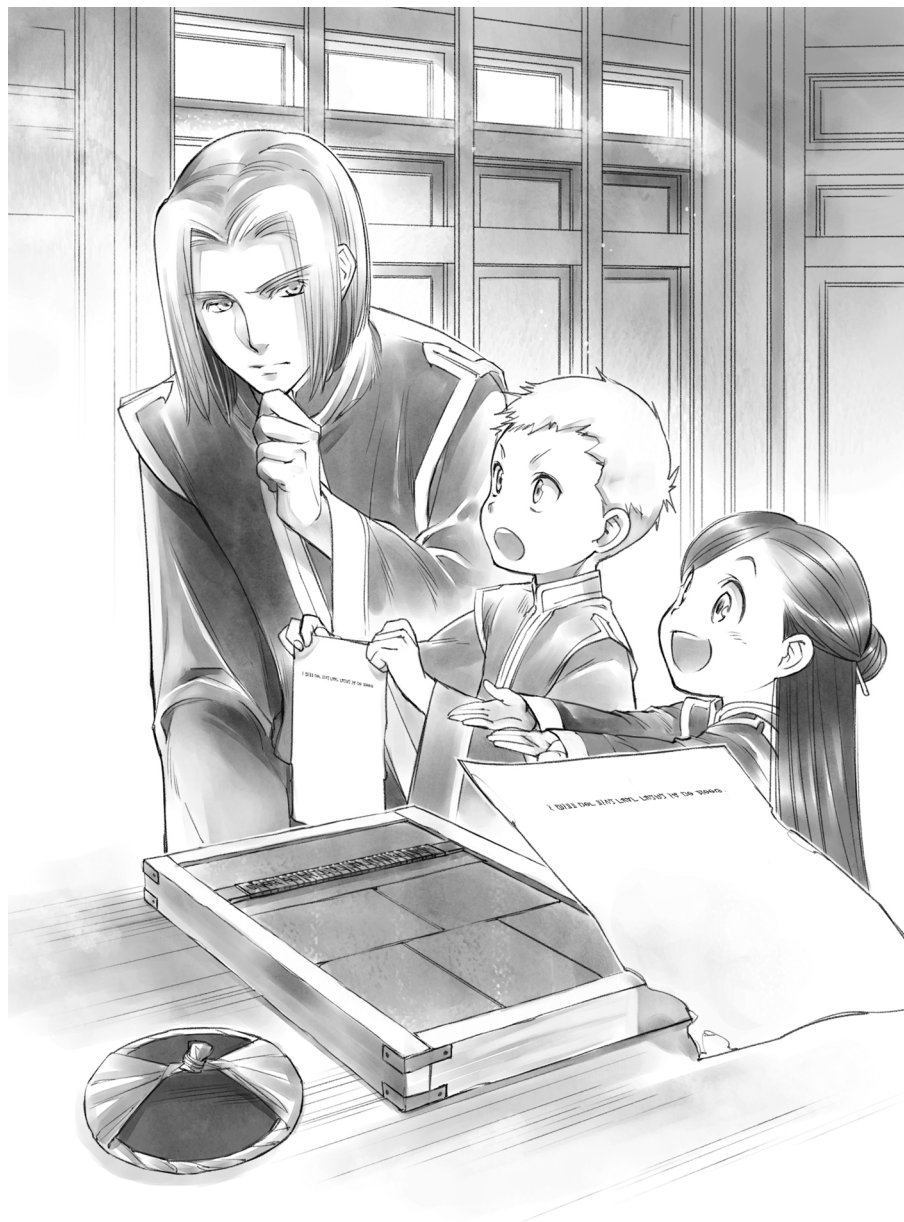
“Sister Myne, it is ready.”

“Would you print a sheet, then? Please use a discarded piece of paper so as to not waste any.”

Gil put the forme on the printing press, then smeared it with ink. He then placed the paper on top of that.

“Normally you would move this part of the printing press to literally press the paper against the letter types and distribute the ink equally, but since the press isn’t ready yet we’ll have to rub a baren against it instead. Once that’s done, we set the paper aside to dry and print the next sheet, though in this case we’ll just print on a different part of this same sheet to save resources.”

Gil printed the same sentence on the sheet of paper over and over again. As the High Priest stared in astonishment, I explained with pride that, when completed, the press could distribute the ink much faster than the baren.



I expected the High Priest to start praising the printing press, but instead he just put a hand against his forehead. "This will change history... Yes, I understand that now."

"Er... Pardon...?"

I had thought that the High Priest would be overjoyed considering all the expensive books he had, but it seemed not. He looked down at me and gave a slight smile, though the intense look in his light golden eyes made it very unsettling.

"Myne, there is *much* we need to talk about now."

...Huh? I did report this to him through Fran and Damuel, didn't I? Why is this happening?

Their tour ended without much else happening. Sylvester returned to the workshop after finishing his business discussion with Benno; he swished the pulp around and accidentally ripped a few sheets of paper when trying to stick them to the drying board, but I expected that much. No harm was brought to our tools and Sylvester seemed satisfied, so all in all the tour went as well as I could have hoped. It was pretty obvious that the High Priest intended to lecture me or otherwise interrogate me later, but well, as terrifying as that was, at least the tour was over.

The one thing I didn't quite get was the ghastly pallor of exhaustion on Benno's face when he returned with Sylvester. He accompanied me to my chambers after the tour had ended, and the second we were there his head slumped over; it seemed that he didn't even have the energy to return home without resting here first.

"Benno, what exactly did Brother Sylvester say to you? I can complain to the High Priest for you if he was overly cruel. Would you like me to?"

There wasn't much I could do, but had Sylvester been particularly cruel then the High Priest would surely step in to make things right. I thought that would be a welcome offer, but Benno just kept his sulky silence and started grinding a fist against my head.

"Ow, ouch! Where's that coming from?!"

"...This is your fault," he muttered with a dark expression before readying his fist again.

I protected my head with my hands, glaring at him with teary eyes. "What did I even do wrong?!"

"I can't say. I can't say, but it's your fault."

"Did he give you a hard time about the chef swapping or something?" That was the only thing I could imagine Sylvester giving Benno a hard time about, but he just blinked in surprise like he hadn't even considered that and then shook his head.

"Wrong."

“Then what?”

Benno looked at me with bitter frustration, then scratched up his gelled back hair and let out a groan. “...Forget it. The one thing I’m sure of here is that I’ve been given the opportunity of a lifetime. Not sure whether I’ll be able to make good use of it, though.”

“Well, I have no idea what you’re talking about, but good luck.” I gave him the best words of support I could given my limited understanding of the situation, but that only seemed to tick Benno off. He pinched both of my cheeks at the same time.

“That hurtsh... Benno, would you like to eat lunch here?”

“Nah. I gotta get home and sort this mess out in my head,” he replied, before abruptly standing up and leaving my chambers, dragging his feet like an exhausted office worker walking home.

Seriously, what did Sylvester say to him?

That afternoon, two letters were sent to my chambers, one of which was a personal invitation to the High Priest’s lecture room. It had been scheduled for the day after tomorrow, in the afternoon before I was due to go home. I immediately wrote him a reply; I could probably survive a lecture knowing I would be going home to the comfort of my family right after.

The other letter was from Sylvester. In it he both thanked me for hosting his tour, and ordered me to take him to the forest tomorrow. It was easy to give an order like that, but not so easy for me to actually go to the forest, considering my health and the fact I would need a guard.

“Sir Damuel, it wouldn’t be possible for me to go to the forest, would it?” I murmured, flicking the letter with my finger.

Damuel—who would have to accompany me as my bodyguard—shrugged his shoulders with an exasperated expression. “Apprentice, could you even walk that far?”

“I could. I walked to the forest quite regularly before my baptism... Though it is quite a time-consuming walk.”

There were few adult men patient enough to endure my slow walking speed, which meant that I was being carried more often than I walked as of late. But that didn’t mean I couldn’t walk at all—I just wasn’t as quick on my feet as everyone else.

“Okay. Let’s put aside whether or not you can actually walk there. The actual issue, then, is that as your bodyguard, I can’t recommend an apprentice shrine maiden like you going to a forest. I think it would be better if you had someone else guide him there.”

We were dealing with Sylvester here. I could have asked Dad had he been off work, but his next break wasn’t until the day after tomorrow. Tuuli had mentioned that he was scheduling his day off so

that he could come and take me home, and since she usually came with him, they both definitely had work tomorrow.

“The only person I could ask is Lutz, but it would be a big load on him.”

Lutz was already taking the children to the forest tomorrow, assuming it was sunny, so it would be a natural choice to ask him. I would have rather asked Leon since he was older and could probably handle Sylvester better, but a merchant’s son like him would barely go to the forest and therefore wouldn’t know much about it.

While I was practicing the harspiel after breakfast the next day, Gil came rushing in despite having already departed for the workshop earlier that morning.

“Sister Myne, the blue priest’s already waitin’ in the workshop! Er, I mean, he is presently waiting in the workshop.”

Gil usually opened the workshop at second bell, where he would prepare for the day’s work until the gray priests in the orphanage finished breakfast. But when he went to the workshop to open it today, he found Sylvester was already there at the door, dressed in the dirty secondhand clothes I had given him and waiting with his head held high.

Gil had immediately rushed back to tell me, so I stopped my harspiel practice and headed to the workshop with him and Damuel. I arrived just as those in the orphanage had finished their breakfast. Humbly kneeling gray priests and children holding baskets, ready to go to the forest, were gathering in the workshop. In front of them was Sylvester, who was carrying a magnificent bow.

“Good morning, Brother Sylvester.”

“You’re late, Myne.” He glared at me with dissatisfaction, but that wasn’t my fault.

“You simply came too soon, Brother Sylvester. You can see that you arrived before anyone had even finished their breakfast. Furthermore, I will not be accompanying you to the forest. I would only be dead weight.”

“Yeah, you do walk pretty slow. So, who’s gonna be taking me there?”

Sylvester’s deep green eyes shone with anticipation as he looked around eagerly, his bundle of blueish-purple hair swishing behind his back. The silver hair band he had used to tie it up didn’t match his secondhand clothes at all.

“The children are generally taken to the forest by Lutz and Leon, the leherls from the Gilberta Company. I intend to ask Lutz to take you, so please wait until they arrive.”

I gestured at a box for him to sit on, but he instead paced around

the workshop, unable to calm down. I let out a slow sigh. “Brother Sylvester, do you truly intend to go to the forest?”

“Of course. That’s why I had you get these dirty clothes for me. Here, take a look. They look pretty good on me, huh?”

Sylvester gave a confident grin and spread his arms to better show me the clothes, but they didn’t suit him at all. In fact, they stuck out more than I ever would have expected. He looked exactly like a rich person having fun blending in as a commoner, despite not actually blending in at all.

That said, I could at least tell that he really was excited to hunt. Not only was he wearing the secondhand clothes I’d brought him, but he had put on some slightly worn out leather boots. He probably found the wooden shoes I had given him too difficult to walk in. In contrast, the bow he had was much more intricately crafted than any you would find in the lower city. As far as I could tell, he really was just planning on hunting.

“Brother Sylvester, if you do intend to hunt in the forest, please promise to listen to what Lutz, your guide, says.”

Sylvester looked at me, his expression hardening just a little. I knew that nobles were of higher status than commoners, but as we were both blue robes, we were equal within the temple. And since the High Priest was absent, only I was capable of speaking out against Sylvester.

“Just as there are rules within the nobles’ forest, there are rules in the lower city’s forest. Hunting locations and gathering locations are kept separate, and there are other rules kept among the hunters. If you intend to break these rules and wield your authority as a noble to crush any dissidence, then I would rather you never enter the lower city’s forest in the first place.”

There were many unspoken rules that ensured everyone could make the most of the lower city’s forest, including the pre-baptism kids who would go gathering. Ignoring those rules when going out to hunt might end in people getting hurt, so if Sylvester were to dismiss them as irrelevant, I would ask the High Priest to stop him from going.

Sylvester listened to my explanation with a serious expression, and nodded in response. “Yeah, this is the first time I’m going there. Of course I’m gonna listen to what my guide’s got to say.”

At that moment, Lutz and Leon arrived, both dressed for the forest.

“Morning, Myne. Rare to see you in the workshop.”

“Morning, Lutz. Good morning, Leon.”

“Good morning, Sister Myne.”

After saying their good mornings, they both noticed Sylvester watching with an upraised chin and hurriedly greeted him as well.

They were clearly baffled to see the blue priest from yesterday now standing before them wearing secondhand clothes, so I explained that Sylvester wished to go hunting in the forest.

“Lutz, I’m really sorry about this, but I have to ask you to guide Sylvester to the forest. Leon, Gil, I ask that you both keep an eye on the children while they’re gathering. Will everything be fine?”

“We will make sure it is.”

Sylvester hefted up his fancy bow and departed for the forest with Lutz and the others.

“I can’t shake the feeling that this will go really poorly.”

“I’m sure he knows what he’s doing. Let’s go back to your chambers, apprentice.”

It’s hard to imagine Sylvester ever really knows what he’s doing, I disagreed on the inside before returning to my chambers.

Lutz burst into my chambers at the verge of sixth bell, just as the sun was starting to set. “Myne, mind if we borrow your chefs? We’ve got a lot of meat to take care of.”

I felt kind of bad about asking my chefs to do more work right before they were about to go home, but people experienced with butchering animals could do it a lot faster than people who weren’t. We would get nowhere if I just handed the orphanage kids kitchen knives and told them to get to work.

“Fran, would you go and ask Hugo and the others to handle this? Sir Damuel, let us depart for the workshop.”

When Damuel and I arrived at the workshop, we found the ground by the front door covered in feathers and blood as the nearby kids plucked like mad. Hugo and Ella arrived shortly after carrying knives, and murmured an impressed “Woah” as they too watched the bloody sight with awe.

Sylvester, having heard this, turned to them with his chest proudly puffed out. “Take a look, Myne! There’re lots of ’em. Pretty impressive, huh? I bagged’m all.”

“Welcome back, Brother Sylvester.”

Sylvester was in such a good mood it was almost hard to believe. He had hunted a small deer and four birds, it seemed. Hugo and Ella both got right to work butchering the small deer on a table.

“Ella, it looks like they’ve already drained the blood, so let’s just take out the guts that spoil fast. We don’t have much time today; we can cook the meat tomorrow.”

I was watching their expert butchering from afar with a somewhat distant look in my eyes when the kids started to report what they had done today while plucking the feathers with broad smiles. In the past they had only known meat when it was prepared, and the fact they

were in bright enough spirits to chat right now while plucking dead birds showed just how much they had grown. And the same went for me; in the past I would have shrieked and passed out the second I saw all the blood and guts.

“Sister Myne, Brother Syl is so amazing. A bird flying super high in the sky fell out of nowhere, and it turned out Brother Syl had shot it with an arrow!”

“We hung it on a branch to drain the blood, and there was so much of it that the ground eventually went pure red.”

“Then some animals came to get the birds! Brother Syl got those too. But we left them there, since he said their meat was hard and didn’t taste good.”

The children eagerly told me tales of Sylvester’s heroic exploits, though imagining the bloody forest was kinda scary. Sylvester was beaming a grin as the kids lavished him with praise.

“It is quite impressive that you managed to hunt this much in one day, Brother Sylvester. What do you intend to do with all of this? Should we have it taken to your kitchen?” I thought he might want his own chefs to take care of it, but Sylvester hurriedly shook his head in reply, almost as if there would be some problem with us bringing the meat to his kitchen.

“Nah, I don’t need any of this. I’ll, er... I’ll just donate it all to the orphans.”

“Yaaay! Thank you, Brother Syl!”

“You’re so cool, Brother Syl! I hope you come to the forest with us again someday!”

The children rejoiced, having been given more meat than they usually ever got to eat. They all showered Sylvester with excited praise as their eyes shone with a newfound hunger.

“...Um, ‘Brother Syl?’” I asked Sylvester timidly, having only just realized the nickname the kids had been using. Maybe he found it offensive.

“Yeah, apparently they found ‘Sylvester’ hard to say, so I let them shorten it. Don’t copy them, though.”

“Why not?” I tilted my head in confusion and Sylvester snorted, looking down at me with a teasing glint in his eyes.

“I’ll never meet the kids here unless I come to the orphanage myself, but you and I will be meeting elsewhere. A thoughtless kid like you would probably end up calling me by the wrong name at the wrong time.”

It kind of hurt that even Sylvester already considered me thoughtless, but I couldn’t exactly say he was wrong. All I could do was droop my head and agree with him.

“You’re entirely correct.”

Sylvester, laughing in agreement, poked my cheek. "It's been a long time since I've had this much fun. As thanks, you can have this."

Sylvester held out a clenched fist before opening it in front of me. I thought he would be holding a bug or twig he'd found in the forest, but he was actually holding a necklace with a pitch-black stone that looked like gleaming onyx.

"Um, thank you. What is this? A magic tool...?"

"It's a kind of magic tool, but not one that'll help you use magic. Praying to the gods won't make anything happen."

I nodded, understanding it to be a magic tool with some specific functionality like the sound-blocking ones, and looked up at Sylvester. "What is it used for, then?"

"I'm gonna be gone for a while. This is a protection charm. If you're in a bad spot, press your blood against the dark gem part and I'll come save you."

It was hard for me to imagine a situation where I would need to call Sylvester for help; surely I could just run crying to the High Priest. Still, there was no reason for me to refuse a gift.

"Turn around," Sylvester said. "I'll put it on you."

I turned around as instructed. And yet, Sylvester clicked his tongue.

"Get your hair out of the way. How am I supposed to put it on you like this? Have you never been given jewelry by a man before?!"

"Well, a boy put a hairpin on me once."

I think Benno put one on me before, at least.

But even including my Urano days, no man had ever given me a necklace. In fact, nobody outside of my family had ever given me any accessories at all. With that in mind, perhaps I had accomplished something quite impressive by having a guy give me a necklace before I even turned eight here.

...So it's all about the face, huh? A pretty face is all that matters?

My old childhood friend Shuu always said that my freaky obsession with books meant I would never be popular with boys, but perhaps it was finally time to prove him wrong. And all it took was a little reincarnation.

"Brother Sylvester, do I look cute with it on?"

"The point of a protection charm isn't to look cute. Just keep it on and don't take it off. That's all that matters."

...I know I'm just a kid, but would it really have killed you to give me a compliment or two there?

I puffed out my cheeks with pouty annoyance at Sylvester's curt attitude, which inspired him to press his palms against my cheeks. Air blew out of my mouth, but he didn't let go. In fact, he was pressing against them harder.

“Myne, always keep it on. Never take it off for a second. Got it?” said Sylvester, his deep green eyes more serious than I had ever seen them before.

Talking with the High Priest and Returning Home

Facing both a lecture from the High Priest and finally going home again was like experiencing heaven and hell at once. On the one hand, I couldn't wait for later in the day when Dad and Tuuli would come get me, but on the other, just thinking about the High Priest's lecture made my stomach turn.

"Follow me, Myne."

"Okay..."

When I arrived at the High Priest's room with Fran and Damuel, the High Priest immediately took me to the hidden room—which might as well have been a lecture room by now—just like the letter had said he would.

I sat down on my usual bench. The High Priest picked up a pen and a wooden board resting on his table, set down a bottle of ink, and then looked at me with his legs crossed in a pristine interrogation stance.

"I did not summon you here for a lecture. I believe I said that I had things I wanted to ask you. First, I would like to know the details of the printing press you are attempting to make."

He had apparently made a list of all of the things he hadn't been able to ask me when touring the Myne Workshop, and now that we were alone he asked question after question about how many books the printing press could make and how fast it could do that. However, I didn't have clear answers for any of his questions.

"I haven't finished a printing press yet, and I will need a lot more metal letter types before I can print books composed of nothing but text. Not to mention that we can't print anything without first making the ink and paper in our own workshop. It's impossible to know how fast and how much we'll be able to print after finishing just a single printing press."

"I see," replied the High Priest before looking back down at the board in his hands. "In that case, I would like to discuss its impact on history. When printing begins, what will happen to those who are copying books by hand? In your world, what happened to those who made a living off of copying books?"

"Some people continued as a hobby, but in terms of employment, the waves of automation crushed them more and more over time.

Indeed, it was a slow process, and they faded away entirely over the course of about two centuries. Naturally, it didn't happen within a single decade or two."

The High Priest frowned while scratching away on his board. "You said that in your world all citizens of your country attended schools, and that it was normal for everyone to know how to read, but I do not imagine it was always that way. What changed in your society as a result of the proliferation of books and the increased literacy rate?"

"Everything changed. But the specifics varied by country, and by culture. I don't think the details will mean much to an entirely different world."

"What changed, for example?" asked the High Priest, and I thought about the history I remembered from my Urano days. A lot came to mind, but I wasn't sure whether the High Priest would understand since he lacked the background knowledge I had.

"There are many examples of working-class commoners overthrowing the ruling class and starting a government ruled by the people through sharing information and teaching each other. On the other hand, there were also manipulators printing and distributing hand-selected information to influence the populace one way or another. I know that commoners learning to read significantly changes the means through which information is communicated, but I don't know who might exploit that and how."

"So the impact will be so enormous that it is impossible to say what might happen, partially due to outside influences. Very troubling indeed..." murmured the High Priest while continuing to scribble away on his board.

"Unlike my world, this world can't survive without mana wielders, right? It's hard to say whether the populace will take the same courses of action even after the literacy rate rises and books spread. In fact, you could use books to spread the knowledge of just how much nobles do for commoners. Though that will have the opposite effect if nobles and priests aren't taking their jobs seriously."

"What do you mean?" asked the High Priest with a confused look.

I shrugged. "The people of the lower city don't really know what nobles are doing. Only those in farming towns where the Spring Prayer is held see the nobles and blue priests directly supporting their livelihoods by filling chalices with mana. That's why their faith is so strong, and why they are so much more willing to pray to the gods than those in the lower city are. I would think so, anyway."

"I never even considered the faith of the lower city residents, nor did I consider informing them of what we nobles do. I find your perspective fascinating; you see things from angles we never would."

Not only was I of common birth here, I still firmly remembered my time living as Urano on Earth. The High Priest seemed to be interested in the otherworldly perspective that gave me, both literally and figuratively.

“Hm. In that case... I will make my decision based on what I know for certain now. Myne, do not begin printing yet.”

“Wha? Why?”

“It would be possible to keep control of the populace no matter how they respond, through the power of mana. But there will no doubt be nobles who express their opposition to printing.”

According to the High Priest, those who copied books by hand earned a large and stable income. For that reason, most of those who copied books by hand were priests, shrine maidens, and students of the Royal Academy from poor families. He said that if I started flooding the market with text-only printed books, I would earn the ire of almost every laynoble in the region.

“...So you’re saying the vested interests are nobles?” That was on an entirely different level from the vested interests we had come into conflict with before, and honestly, it was terrifying.

As I trembled in fear, the High Priest nodded. “Up until now you’ve only printed picture books for children, and I believe you said you were restricted by your need to print with paper templates. For those reasons, I imagined the impact on nobles and priests would be limited enough that there was no reason to stall your efforts. However, what will happen when the printing press is complete?”

I had decided to procure metal letter types to circumvent the pain and tedium of cutting out each letter of a stencil by hand. The easier it was to print books composed entirely of text, the better. And that was the exact line of thought that had led to the jobs of those who copied books by hand being stolen away back on Earth.

“How long do you want me to hold off on printing...?” I asked, wanting to know how long I would have to endure the pain of having a printing press on hand but not being able to use it.

His light-gold eyes steadily focused on me. “Until you are adopted by Karstedt.”

“Bwuh?”

“A commoner interfering with noble matters would be crushed in the blink of an eye. But if you were the daughter of an archnoble, performing business approved of by the archduke, it would not be so easy for them to crush you and your printing operation.”

A lone commoner girl on her own would probably be like an ant to them, easily stomped on. But I would have status to my name as the adopted daughter of an archnoble, and with the archduke’s direct authorization, my printing would become government business. The

laynobles who would then be earning cash on the side would be in no position to act against me. In other words, according to the High Priest, I would want to wrap laynobles into the printing business; nobody could stop us if we began printing all over the duchy at once. The scale of the discussion had gotten so large I couldn't help but gulp.

...But could I bear to wait two whole years to start printing, now that we had a printing press ready to use? It had only been two and a half years since I had started living as Myne. Could I survive spending that long a time doing nothing but printing picture books for children?

As if reading the thoughts stirring through my head, the High Priest looked me straight in the eyes, his lips curving into a grin. "Well then, Myne. What would you say to becoming Karstedt's adopted daughter now? You can begin making your books immediately."

He was trying to tempt me, and for a moment my heart wavered. But it really was for no more than a moment, and a second later I shook my head.

"No. I can finally, finally go home... I won't turn my back on them now."

"Do you loathe the idea of becoming Karstedt's adopted daughter that much?"

"Not at all. I think Lord Karstedt is a wonderful man. He is stouthearted and quite reliable, not to mention high in status. I can't imagine a better adoptive father to have."

But still, I wanted to be with my family. I only had two more years left to spend with them, and I didn't want to make that time any shorter than it already was.

"I suppose you would miss your family after being apart from them for so long. Hm... Give this another thought after returning home and enjoying your fill of warmth and affection. Perhaps you will find that you have changed your mind," said the High Priest with a slight, victorious grin. It was a grin that made it clear that he expected my love for books to overwhelm me, until eventually I agreed to be adopted before turning ten.

I clenched my hands into fists on my lap and looked right back into his eyes. "My answer won't change. I'll stay with my family for as long as I can. You're the one who showed me just how awful of a daughter I was when I prioritized books above everything else, and how much I need to treasure the new family I've been given."

His magic tool had thrust the past back into my face in the most realistic way possible, engraving into my heart that, once lost, one's family could never return. I wasn't the same person I was when I had sacrificed everything for my books.

My reply made the High Priest's expression turn into something a

little more wistful. "Resolve that strong won't soon break, I imagine. Very well. Enjoy your two years of printing a minuscule amount of children's books."

"...I'll try."

"Myne, we're here to get you," declared Dad.

"Did you finish your talk with the High Priest?" asked Tuuli.

Upon leaving the High Priest's room and returning to my chambers, I found Dad and Tuuli standing in the first floor hall, already waiting for me.

"Dad, Tuuli!"

The second I saw them, the knot in my stomach that had been weighing me down since my talk with the High Priest unraveled and was instantly blown away. I ran over to Dad and jumped into his arms, leaving Fran and Damuel standing in the doorway.

"Up you go!" Dad had expected that and caught me, lifting me high into the air. After a spin, he set me down and ruffled my hair with his big hand, continuing on until it was all over the place like always.

"Geez, Myne. Your hair's all messed up now," said Tuuli with a smile, having watched everything. She took out my hair stick and combed my hair with her fingers. I gripped the hair stick tightly and relished the feeling of Tuuli dressing my hair.

"One sec, I'll be back down after getting changed," I said in a pleased voice while racing up to the second floor where Delia began assisting me. I stripped off my blue robes, my shirt with large, poofy sleeves that most rich young girls would wear, and pushed my arms through the sleeves of my Gilberta Company apprentice uniform for the first time in ages. It felt a little tighter on me than last time I had worn it, though maybe that was just my imagination.

Back when I had holed up for the winter it was cold enough that I had to wear a thick coat just to survive outside, but now that I was going home it was warm enough that I didn't need a coat at all.

"...So, Sister Myne. Are families really that good?" Delia tilted her head in confusion while doing up the buttons of my blouse. "No matter how faithfully we serve you, Sister Myne, you always leave. Is your family that much better than us?"

"I didn't hate my time here over the winter. You all served me well, and I had a pleasant time. But I missed my family, and I do want to be with them if I can." I knew that Delia and the others were serving me as best they could, but I still wanted to be with my family. I still wanted to go home. "I'm sorry, Delia."

"You don't need to apologize or anything, Sister Myne. It's just... I really don't get it. What is a family, anyway?" asked Delia, blinking

her light-blue eyes more out of curiosity over my choice than out of reproach for me abandoning them. She had been raised in the orphanage, unsure of what her parents even looked like, and since she even avoided the orphans she had been raised with, she had nothing even close to resembling a family.

“Mmm. I think it differs depending on the person, but I suppose my family is a home for me?”

“Your home?”

“Yes. The place I can relax more than anywhere else,” I answered, and upon hearing that, Delia shot an envious glance toward the staircase.

“...That definitely does sound nice.”

Once I was done changing, I started grabbing all of the things I was taking back home with me. Rosina, seeing that, warned me that I was lacking grace and that I needed to take more care to move with elegance.

“Your talents as a harspiel player have grown much over the winter, and you carry yourself much more gracefully than before. But you are swayed easily by your surroundings, so please do remember what you’ve learned, even after returning home.”

Rosina, acting entirely like the High Priest, began giving me an earnest list of warnings to keep in mind after returning home. There were so many warnings that I would have liked for her to write them down; I wasn’t sure I would be able to remember half, let alone all of them. She was going way too overboard. It wasn’t like we would never see each other again.

“Rosina, do remember that I will be returning tomorrow. Can this not wait until then?”

“Ah, yes... You will be returning tomorrow.” Rosina put a hand over her mouth, as if she had forgotten that entirely, and then gave a light, melancholic smile. “It felt as though you would never be returning here again. Perhaps because I never saw Sister Christine again after she returned home,” she explained, wearing an expression so tragic that, if she were a statue, she could be placed right in the middle of the chapel. The wounds left by her former mistress were deeper than I had thought.

“Rosina, I will return to the temple posthaste.”

“Indeed. I shall be waiting.”

There wasn’t much I needed to bring back home with me. I didn’t need fancy clothes or shoes, and my family had their own daily necessities. All I really needed to take back was the tote basket I had brought with me.

I descended down the stairs with my basket, and both Delia and Rosina followed after me. They were seeing me off at the door.

“Dad, Tuuli, I’m ready.”

All my attendants were gathered on the first floor. Gil looked like he had just rushed all the way back from the workshop after being informed, and Fran was dressed as though he would be walking me home.

“Alright, time to go. Everyone, thanks for watching after Myne all winter. It means a lot,” said Dad.

“No need to thank us, sir. We’re her attendants, y’know. It’s what we do,” Gil replied with a grin. I smiled a little at his tone, which was a mixture of politeness and casualness, while looking over everyone.

“Well then. I entrust my chambers to you in my absence.”

My attendants all knelt and crossed their arms in front of their chests. “We await your safe return.”

As my bodyguard, Damuel had to accompany me on my way home, and Fran would be joining us to teach Damuel the way there, since this was his first time. We met up with Lutz in front of the workshop and went home together.

Upon passing through the temple gate I saw the stone paved road, now free of snow, and walked on it with heavy nostalgia. It had been a long time since I had walked through the city on my own two feet, and today I was walking while holding hands with Lutz and Tuuli. I wasn’t allowed to hold hands like this while inside the temple. Their hands were warm and cheered me up. Dad was following behind us, talking to Damuel and Fran about the city’s security and the dangers I faced.

“Been a long time since I had to walk at your pace, Myne,” said Lutz.

“Um, Myne. Did you, um, get slower at walking over the winter?” asked Tuuli.

“Wait, what?! Am I walking slower?!”

Neither Fran nor Damuel hurried me while we were in the temple, and when time was of the essence, one of them just carried me. It was possible that nobody trying to rush me had led to me falling back to the slower pace I was more comfortable with.

“How fast did I used to walk? This fast?” I tried my best to work my legs harder, but Lutz just laughed and shook his head.

“Give it up, Myne. You don’t need to push yourself right now. Just relax and enjoy the walk home, yeah?”

I looked around while slowly trudging my way along, and soon enough I saw the Gilberta Company. Suddenly I remembered that the High Priest had told me to hold off on printing for a while.

“I think we might need to go talk to Benno tomorrow...”

“Did something happen?”

“The High Priest told me not to print for now. I think I should tell

him about that,” I said with a shrug.

Tuuli looked at me, her blue eyes wide with surprise. “Awww, what? But why? Didn’t you really, really want to start printing?”

“It has to do with nobles.”

“...Oh. That’s a shame.” Tuuli used her free hand to pat my head; I shut my eyes and smiled while enjoying the feeling.

“He didn’t tell me I could never do it. I just need to wait for two years. I’ll be fine.”

And I made the right choice. A printing press wouldn’t pat my head or try to cheer me up when I’m sad like this.

“Alright. I’ll come tomorrow at second bell to take you to the temple. Take care not to go outside before then,” said Damuel with a strict expression as we arrived at the plaza well. It seemed that even at home I wouldn’t be allowed to go outside without a bodyguard.

“Understood, Sir Damuel. Fran, I imagine the journey back and forth will be taxing, but thank you.”

“It is nothing. Please enjoy your time with your family tonight. I will be awaiting your return tomorrow,” said Fran while crossing his arms in front of his chest.

“Thank you, Fran, Sir Damuel. I shall see you tomorrow.”

Fran and Damuel turned around and left the plaza. I waved Lutz goodbye, and began to climb the stairs to our fifth-floor home; but before I knew it, I was gasping for air.

“You can do it, Myne. Just a little more.”

The fact I couldn’t even make it all the way home without Dad and Tuuli’s encouragement showed just how much stamina I had lost over the winter. I was already weak as is, and would really rather not lose what little strength I had managed to build up.

“I’m home, Mom.”

I opened the door to my home for the first time in what felt like forever, and was immediately hit by the aroma of cooking food. Mom was already setting the table, having likely heard us talking while climbing the stairs. I broke out into a smile as I inhaled the nostalgic scent of my mom’s cooking.

“Welcome home, Myne.” Mom, holding her large belly, looked up after setting down a plate. Her smile filled my heart with so much happiness and nostalgia that it buried all the sadness that had built up within me.

“It’s been so long since I walked outside. I’m starving.”

“Put down your things and help me get ready, then.”

“Okaaay.”

I set down my tote basket and washed my hands, then started setting the table with Tuuli. It was kinda fun, since it had been so long

since I had done any work myself.

“So, Mom. Is it almost time?” I said, looking at her massive belly. She patted it with a loving smile.

“It could happen any day now. Maybe the baby was waiting for you to get home, Myne.”

If it had been, nothing would make me happier. I patted Mom’s belly and said, “Your big sister’s home now.” I felt a kick, entirely as though the baby was replying to me. “Wow! The baby kicked. It felt like it was talking to me!” I said, sending a laugh through my family.

I ate Mom’s cooking, bathed with Tuuli while playing around, got into the bed that was so narrow I’d end up hitting Tuuli if I tried rolling over, and went to sleep with my family.

When morning came, Mom was groaning from labor pains.

A New Member of the Family

When the sun broke the night sky, Dad was the first to hear Mom's groaning and jump out of bed.

"Tuuli, Myne. Your mother's going into labor. I'm going to get the midwife! You two get dressed and do what you need to do!" Dad said while speedily getting dressed and bursting out of the house to get the midwife.

Everyone but me seemed to know what their roles were, and before I knew it Tuuli was changed and racing for the front door. "I'll go get Karla! Myne, you change and look after Mom!"

"Okay!" I gave a big nod, swept up in the moment, but really I didn't know what I was supposed to do while looking after Mom. I was in such a panic that nothing came to mind.

"Um, umm..."

"Myne. Water, please," asked Mom in a breathless tone. I hurried to the kitchen, where I poured water from the jug into a cup which I brought back to her. She gave me a faint smile and sipped the water.

I saw the large beads of sweat on her forehead and went to prepare a cloth, at which point I suddenly remembered something important.

...Cleanliness! Disinfection! Being sanitary is absolutely vital!

Our home was cleaner than most. Tuuli and Mom helped to keep the house clean since they thought I was just a clean freak, and by now everyone was used to washing their hands as a matter of habit. But the same was not true for the midwife and neighboring moms who would be coming to help.

"Wh-Wh-What should I do?!" I would at least want them to wash their hands and disinfect them with alcohol, but naturally there was no disinfectant alcohol in our house. "I-Is there any alcoholic drink here I could make something from... Um, umm..."

We didn't have any alcoholic drinks pure enough to be used as a disinfectant like vodka was. The wine I used in the rumtopf was very high in alcohol content, but there would be too many impurities for it to be reliable. Had I returned home from the temple sooner, I could have asked Benno to find me some distilled liquor high in alcohol content.

"...But surely it's better than nothing." The filth of the outside was no doubt worse than the alcohol's impurities. I found the wine and

some clean clothes to prepare for disinfecting.

"I'm back. I'll go get some water."

The second Tuuli came back, she started to leave again with a bucket in hand. In her place came Karla and several other neighboring wives. They each held buckets full of water from the well, which they poured into a tub that they put over a fire to boil.

"Tuuli, we need to get everyone's hands clean. And we need to put the tools in boiling water to disinfect them. We need to—" I jumped at Tuuli before she could leave the house to go and get water.

"Right, right. Cleanliness. I get it. Okay. I understand. So go be with Mom, Myne." Tuuli ignored me, however, since I wouldn't be of any help at all when it came to the birthing itself. She just pushed me into the bedroom and left.

I walked up to Mom and took her hand as she breathed heavily. When the labor pains hit her, she squeezed my hand so hard I thought my bones would break.

"Mom, when giving birth, you should breathe in and out. Like hee hee hoo. It's called the (Lamaze) technique."

"The... what?" Despite her pain, Mom gave me a faint smile.

"Umm, it's a breathing technique to help with the pain. Sorry, I don't really remember it too well."

In my Urano days, I had never even considered that I would get pregnant myself or have anything to do with helping someone give birth, so I didn't really bother to read much about pregnancy. I knew the name of the Lamaze technique, but didn't remember enough to explain what it was or why it helped.

"Hee hee hoo, right?" Mom laughed and we breathed in and out together while she endured the labor pains.

Before long, the midwife and the neighboring wives came into the room. I gasped at the sight of them and spread my arms out in front of the bed to keep them away from Mom.

"Before you do anything, wash your hands to make sure they're clean!"

"Aaah, right. I forgot you were a clean freak," Karla said with exasperation, but she went ahead and told the other wives to clean their hands. Once that was done, I had them wipe their hands using my wine-soaked cloth.

That should help a little.

"Now, Myne, you'll get in the way here. Go out to the kitchen. And tell that good-for-nothing Gunther to stop pacing around and get the chair set up. He's had how many children and still won't listen to what we say? Good grief."

I grimaced at the sight of the drying cloth turning dirty as they dried their hands. That meant they weren't getting clean at all, but

before I could say anything Karla forced me out of the bedroom. Having no other choice, I told Dad what she had said and helped him set up the chair.

“Dad, what’s this chair thing for?” I asked, looking at the stained and dirty board that served as a seat. He told me it was where Mom would sit when giving birth.

The second I understood it was an old-fashioned delivery board, I felt the blood drain from my face. I grabbed the cloth and alcohol without even thinking about it. “...I have to disinfect it.”

“Myne, hey! What’re you doing with my wine?!”

“Mom’s going to be sitting on this, isn’t she? I need to disinfect it with alcohol.”

I ignored Dad’s cries and wiped away at the seat with the wine-soaked cloth, until eventually some older lady came to get it. She laughed at the sight of my furious polishing.

“Oh, you’re cleaning that as well? Hah, you sure are a clean freak. Gunther, that’s all we needed you for. Go on downstairs already, would you?”

Apparently, it was forbidden for men to be around during births. With Dad having completed all a father was expected to do, he went back downstairs.

“I’ll stay with Mom.”

“You go too, Myne. You’ll just get in our way crying about cleanliness and all that.”

“But it actually is important!”

“Sure, sure. Go on now.”

Tuuli was going in and out of the bedroom to help, but I was kicked out right away. The door shut behind me and I couldn’t get back in.

“Mom...”

They called me a freak just because I asked for the bare minimum level of cleanliness. Just thinking of historical childbirth death rates sent a shudder down my spine. I was so worried for Mom that I wanted to personally disinfect every single lady in there, but there was nothing more I could do.

Mom had gone into labor when the sun was just starting to rise, but now the sun was slightly above the horizon and shining enough light on the plaza for us to see clearly. We walked outside, and I saw that the neighborhood men were getting to work on some birds.

“Dad, what’s everyone doing?” I asked, walking over to the well where he was starting to pace restlessly and joining him.

“...Men can’t be there for the birth, so we’re preparing for the naming ceremony.”

“What’s a naming ceremony?”

Kids couldn't enter the temple until their baptism, so I wouldn't expect there to be any religious ceremonies for babies. But judging by the name, I could guess that it was something of a small neighborhood celebration.

According to Dad, men were sent off by the women during the birth to go and buy birds, pluck them, and grill them for the naming ceremony. It was a small celebration where the men cooked for themselves since their wives weren't there to feed them, the women who had finished helping with the birth were rewarded with food, and everyone celebrated the birth of a new child.

"Why the heck are you two pacing around the well?" someone asked. I turned to see Lutz in his Gilberta Company apprentice uniform grinning at us, barely holding back laughter.

"Lutz!"

He glanced in the direction of our house. "...How's Mrs. Effa? Is it happening now?"

I nodded.

"Guess you won't be going to the temple today, then. I'll go pass the word along."

"Thanks, Lutz."

"And I guess I'll take this opportunity to say I'll be missing work today. There's a naming ceremony coming up, yeah? The baby's definitely gonna be born healthy; I know I'll need to miss work," said Lutz with a grin.

Dad grinned back and gave a hearty nod.

After seeing Lutz off, Dad and I resumed pacing around the well.

"Dad, don't you need to tell the gate you'll be missing work?"

"Al did that for me when he went off to buy the birds. I'm not budging an inch from here."

"Okay."

As we continued pacing around the well, Lutz's dad, Deid, called over to us in a booming voice. "Gunther, Myne! If you two can't sit still, at least help us over here. This happens every time with you, Gunther, and it's real tiring!"

Deid asked Dad and me to wash vegetables, which we did while crouching in front of the well and continuing our talk. I didn't know how dangerous births were here, so if I didn't keep my mind occupied with something, I wouldn't be able to stop myself from rushing back inside.

"Dad, how long do births usually take?"

"All I remember is how waiting for you and Tuuli to be born took forever. It felt like I was out here all day."

"Your births were real fast, Gunther. Al's child took a lot longer," said Deid, who had come over to get water, with a dismissive shake of

his head.

From Dad's perspective it may have taken a long time, but according to everyone else my mom tended to give birth relatively quickly. That was a relief to me, but Dad just frowned, his brows pushed together in a pitiful expression.

"Doesn't matter to me whether it was fast or slow. As long as the birth goes safely this time, I don't care how long it takes."

"This time?" I asked without thinking too much about it. Maybe he was saying he wanted a healthy child this time instead of a sickly one like me.

"Our first child was a miscarriage. The next was a boy, but he died before the year was up. You and Tuuli survived, but the next one didn't last the winter. And the next was another miscarriage. I want the baby to be safe this time."

The cruel reality of birth survival rates here made my jaw drop in horror. I had read about how low they were in books about the middle ages, with most children not lasting very long at all, but it never properly clicked in my head until now. It carried so much more of a terrifying weight when I heard it from Dad, who had seen his children die prematurely himself. The fear was so much that I couldn't help but look up to the fifth floor of our building. Mom was in there, fighting for her life and the baby's.

"Mom will be okay, won't she?"

"...Myne, you should pray for her."

I shot my arms up and prayed to the gods from the bottom of my heart. "May my mother have the blessing and divine protection of Entrinduge, Goddess of Childbirth and subordinate to the Goddess of Water."

Lutz came back from the Gilberta Company and orphanage with a large basket on his back. He set it down in front of us and started taking out the contents. "Myne, here's a gift of cloth from Master Benno. And when I told your chambers and the workshop about this, Hugo gave us a share of the meat from Brother Syl's hunt the other day."

"...But the baby hasn't even been born yet." Still, everyone's support made me break into a happy smile. "I'll bring these smaller pieces of bird meat home for Mom to eat. We can have the bigger pieces and the deer meat at the ceremony. But that'll only be when she's given birth and the hard-working ladies come outside. You can have some too, Lutz, since you went out and got it," I said, handing Lutz some of the meat.

Dad showed his approval with an enthusiastic nod, and it was then that Tuuli came bursting out into the plaza, her braid bouncing behind her and a full smile on her face.

“Dad, Myne! It went okay! The baby’s a boy!”

“Oooh! Congratulations!” The plaza erupted in a cheer. Thanks to the safe birth, the naming ceremony began and drinking started. The dads said their words of celebration while reaching for beer and starting to cook the meat on pans which had been prepared ahead of time.

“They said you two can come back in. Let’s go.”

The first ones to go and see the baby were the family. Dad, with the basket Lutz had brought on his back, picked me up and cleared the stairs two steps at a time. He was so overjoyed that he ran the entire five stories.

When Dad burst into our home, he thanked the women still inside for their work as they finished cleaning up. They, in turn, congratulated him, and told him how healthy the baby boy looked.

“Dad, don’t bring outside (germs) into the bedroom!”

Before Dad could race into the bedroom, I had him set down the basket and clean his hands. The women called me a clean freak again, but I ignored them. I needed to wash my hands too.

“Mom, can we come in?”

“Gunther, Myne, it’s a boy.”

“Good job, Effa! I’m glad you’re both safe!” Dad knelt in front of Mom’s pillow and took her hand, planting kisses all over the back of her hand and along her fingers.

The baby resting against Mom’s exhausted chest was tiny and covered with little wrinkles, and his skin glowed with the redness of youth. The sight of the little guy washed clean and wearing the little baby clothes Tuuli had made was so moving that I let out an emotional sigh.

“So, what are you going to name the baby?”

“You’ve already decided, right? What’s the name?” Tuuli asked, her eyes bouncing between Mom and Dad excitedly. They both nodded at the same time, then looked at each other and smiled while stroking the baby’s head.

“We’re going to name him ‘Kamil.’ What do you think?” asked Mom.

“Kamil? Kamil... Ahaha.” Tuuli giggled and poked Kamil’s cheek.

Mom watched with a smile, then looked in my direction. “Myne, do you want to try holding him? Tuuli has already.”

That sounded amazing, but I was scared of dropping him. If I remembered correctly, newborn infants weighed about three kilograms on average. Would I be able to carry him?

As I stressed over that, Mom’s expression clouded. “You don’t want to?”

“No, I do. It’s just... I don’t know how to hold babies, and I’m

scared of dropping him,” I explained, making Dad burst out in laughter.

He lifted me up, still laughing, and took off my shoes before setting me down on the bed. “If you hold him while sitting on the bed, you don’t have to worry about dropping him.”

While sitting beside Mom, I carefully picked Kamil up. He was small and light enough for even me to carry. His mouth moved and his eyes opened, looking in my direction with an unfocused gaze. He was alive, and that filled my heart with warmth.

“Kamil, Kamil. It’s me, your big sister.”



I spoke to Kamil, which made his wrinkly face get even more wrinkly. Then, he started to cry, letting out a tiny wail.

“M-Mom. He started crying. Kamil is, um... Wh-What do I do?”

“Don’t worry, dear. Babies always cry. It’s what they do.”

So she said, but that didn’t help at all. I still didn’t know what I should do. All I could do was anxiously look around the room, feeling on the verge of tears, until Dad eventually stopped standing by and picked up Kamil with a grin. Kamil protested with a few more weak wails, but Dad was unfazed.

“Alright, time to introduce Kamil to everybody.”

“Wait, what? You’re going to take a newborn baby outside?”

“Course I am. We’ve gotta show everyone Kamil, remember?”

It wasn’t even debatable that taking a defenseless newborn outside right after it had been born would make it more likely to die. I gasped with fear. “Dad, do you really have to take him outside?”

“Yeah. What’re you trying to say?”

“It’s too dangerous to take a newborn baby outside. You’ll be exposing him to the cold and all the (bacteria) out there. His chances of getting sick will shoot up super high!” I explained as fervently as I could, and Dad’s expression hardened a bit. He looked between me and Kamil, deep in thought, then shook his head with a frown.

“You might be right, but we can’t ignore tradition.”

“If he has to go outside, could you at least keep him warm, and make sure nobody touches him with their dirty hands? You really have to get back inside as soon as you can. That still may not be enough, but—”

“You’re just being silly, Myne. It’ll be fine,” Tuuli said with a shrug. But newborn babies really were at great risk of dying. Especially in an environment like this.

Dad, having just said at the well how much he wanted this baby to be safe, looked up with resolution in his eyes and wrapped Kamil in a warm-looking cloth. “I just gotta get back in as soon as I can, yeah?”

“Uh huh. Take care not to let anybody else hold him.”

“You’re both being way too overprotective,” Tuuli continued in an exasperated tone. “Everybody takes their babies outside to introduce them.”

That may have been so, but in an environment like this, no amount of overprotectiveness could ever be enough. The phrase “better safe than sorry” didn’t even begin to cover it.

I went back down to the well with Tuuli and Dad, who was still carrying Kamil. There we found that there was a big barbeque going on in the plaza—the aforementioned naming ceremony. Here the neighborhood wives who helped with the birth would be rewarded,

and the baby would be introduced to everyone. This was how the neighborhood kept track of who was born in what year, who would be attending which baptism ceremony, and so on. There were no written records, so all we could do was get everyone together and leave lasting memories.

“Everyone, thanks for getting up so early in the morning. My son was born safely. His name is Kamil. I’d like you all to welcome him as a new member of our neighborhood.”

After announcing his name, Dad held Kamil up high so everyone could see, then quickly gave him to Tuuli and urged them back inside, giving the excuse that he might be as weak as I was. Everyone nodded, well aware that I was so sickly it wouldn’t be a surprise if I were to suddenly drop dead.

“It would be a disaster if Kamil was just as weak as Myne.”

“She still gets fevers, but isn’t she getting a little better? I sure hope everything will be fine now that she’s been baptized.”

I hurried back inside with Tuuli, all the while hearing people talk about how none of them expected me to last until my baptism after all my close calls with death. Personally, I would feel more comfortable eating at my own pace inside, rather than fearfully eating barbeque in the plaza while wondering whose hands touched what. Not to mention that I had been told not to go outside without a bodyguard. Although I had been forced outside during the birth, it would probably be wise not to hang around any longer than I absolutely had to.

“Tuuli, what is Mom going to eat?”

“I’ll get her something from the barbeque,” replied Tuuli. It seemed like she really wanted to participate in the barbeque, as she rushed back downstairs right after giving Kamil back to Mom.

I lit a fire on the hearth and warmed up yesterday’s leftover soup. While waiting, I worked my way through the basket that Dad had haphazardly dropped in the corner. I took the bird meat Hugo had prepared to the winter storage room, and put the cloth from Benno in the normal storage area.

“Mom, are you hungry? I warmed up some soup. Your milk won’t be as good if you don’t eat.”

“That’s true. I think I will have some, if you don’t mind.”

I brought soup to Mom as she sat in bed. I got a bowl of my own, too, and set down a chair beside the bed so I could eat with her.

“You’re not going to the barbeque, Myne?”

“Nuh uh. Sir Damuel told me not to go outside without him.”

“I see,” said Mom, her heavy tone reminding me that she was worried about how little time I spent with our neighbors. It hurt that I couldn’t do anything about that. Nobody who knew what I knew about hygiene and sanitation would eat down there.

“Oh, right. Lutz brought us cloth from Benno and meat prepared by my attendants in the temple workshop. Do we need to give them something back or do something for them?” I asked, unsure of what was customary here.

Mom shook her head. According to her, all we had to do was give them gifts ourselves when they had children. That didn’t seem necessarily fair to me, since Benno was a self-proclaimed lifelong bachelor, and most of the people in the temple weren’t exactly in any position to get married.

“That said, Myne, would you please tell them all about Kamil? We want as many people as possible to remember Kamil’s birth.”

“Okay. You can count on me,” I said with a big nod while looking at my tiny baby brother sleeping next to Mom. The sight of him sleeping cozily in a big cloth to stay warm made my own eyes droop.

“Kamil sure is cute.”

“Isn’t he?”

I didn’t have much time to be with Kamil. Since I would be leaving when he turned two, it was entirely possible that he wouldn’t even remember me when he grew up. The most I could do was make picture books and toys for him, both to help him through life once I was gone and to help me stick in his memories as his big sister.

...If picture books are all I can make, I’ll just have to make a whole library of them for my cute little brother.

The black and white picture books would suffice for when he turned two, maybe three months old, but I would want more colorful ones for when he hit six months. That meant I needed to develop colored ink, and think of content for the new baby books.

...Wait. Now that I think about it, there’s a lot I need to do, isn’t there? Am I actually going to be pretty busy over the next two years?

If I wanted to go all out making picture books for Kamil as he grew older, maybe I wouldn’t even have time to print pure text books in the first place. It didn’t matter that the printing press was off-limits. I could just keep on improving the stencils.

...I have a time limit. I need to work fast. Kamil, your big sister’s gonna do everything she can!

Epilogue

As Delia was carrying water from the well up to the second floor, Gil came back from the workshop early. The only time he ever came back to the chambers before Myne arrived was when he had a message from Lutz, so Delia immediately concluded that Myne had gotten sick again.

...Geez, Sister Myne, what are you thinking?! You finally got to go home and you're already sick!

Complaining to her sickly master on the inside, Delia asked Gil whether Sister Myne would be absent for the day. He jerked in surprise, then looked up to where Delia was on the staircase.

"She's, uh... gonna be gone for a few days. Ah, Fran! Listen..." Gil gave a hasty reply and then, upon noticing Fran, ran off to him as quickly as he could.

"There is no need to run, Gil. And please take care to use proper language when giving your report."

Delia went back to climbing the stairs, water in hand, while listening to Fran give Gil the same warnings he always did. When she reached the second floor, she saw that Rosina was tuning the harspiel, having finished the paperwork given to her by Fran. Her beauty shone through as she gracefully tuned the instrument with practiced hands; she kept her nails cut short so that she could play the instrument properly, but otherwise Rosina had the smooth, white hands of one who did no manual labor. She was a music tutor who handled paperwork—physical work like carrying water was outside of her purview.

...Different roles, different expectations. Of course we wouldn't be given similar jobs. That's why I need to learn to do lots of different things, so that the High Bishop will grace me with his nighttime affections!

Delia's resolve strengthened each time she saw the clear gap between her and the other gray apprentice shrine maidens. She had managed to survive her time in the miserable orphanage cellar as the other kids died one by one beside her, and now her life goal was to earn the favor of the highest authority in the temple, the High Bishop, and then live under his protection while receiving more of his love than anyone else. For that reason, she needed to learn from Rosina's example and behave as elegantly and sophisticated as possible.

...After all, Jenni was receiving the High Bishop's affection, and she

used to be one of Sister Christine's attendants too.

Those were Delia's thoughts as she picked up a water jug and headed to the bathing room. Once there, she hefted up the bucket she had already brought in and poured water into the jug. Carrying water to the second floor was important for both cleaning and for relieving oneself when nature called, and getting the bucket all the way up there from the well was the most physically demanding of Delia's chores.

"Mm, I guess one more bucket will do?"

Less water was needed on days where Myne was absent. Delia checked how much was in the jug before leaving the bathing room carrying the empty bucket. There she found Fran instructing Rosina to go and find cloth of certain measurements.

"Want me to search for it, Fran?"

"I would guess that you have not finished carrying the water yet, Delia. Please prioritize that," said Fran with a gentle smile.

Delia would be able to find the cloth Fran needed much faster, and yet he was going out of his way to ask Rosina. In other words, something had happened that they didn't want the High Bishop to know about.

...I wonder what that might be? Delia wondered. She didn't ask, though; she knew that Fran wouldn't give her a clear answer no matter what she tried. Her best move, then, was to go with the flow. Rather than alerting him to her intentions by inquiring directly, she could just casually ask Rosina about it later.

"What will the cloth be used for, Fran?" Rosina asked.

"Wrapping meat," he replied, "It does not need to be high-quality cloth."

...Wrapping meat?

The empty bucket swung as Delia climbed down the stairs, now straining to hear their conversation. Rosina's voice grew too quiet to hear, but was quickly replaced by Gil's from the kitchen. Odd. She had expected him to go right back to the workshop after delivering his report.

"We want it to be, like, Sister Myne thanking everyone in the lower city who's helped her," he said.

"That's fine with me, but how much do you need?" Hugo asked.

"Er... I don't really know too much about that stuff. You can just do whatever seems right, Hugo. Fran said not to give too much that it'd stick out in the lower city, so..."

"Aaah, so it's gotta blend in in the lower city," Ella said, jumping into the conversation. Her voice was loud enough to travel through the kitchen's open door and easily reach the chamber's main hallway. "If it's a celebration, it should be enough to just give them a lot of

deer and say it's a gift from the workshop."

...I wonder what they're celebrating?

The only celebratory events in the life of a gray shrine maiden were their baptism ceremony and their coming of age ceremony—there was nothing else. But Myne wasn't the right age for either of those. Something else must have happened in the lower city. Something worthy of a celebration. Delia considered what that might be as she exited the chambers.

By the time Delia had returned, the hurried atmosphere had dissipated. Gil had left with the meat needed for the celebration; Fran was doing work while wearing his usual, flat expression; and Rosina was helping him since Myne wouldn't be coming. The door to the kitchen had also been closed.

Whenever Myne didn't come to the temple, Delia's schedule was wiped clean; she didn't need to serve anyone food, and she didn't need to make tea during breaks. There were no baths to help with, no clothes to change, and when it came to dishes and laundry everyone just did their own in a matter of minutes.

Fran was busy even when Myne wasn't around. And now that Rosina could help him quite a bit with his work, the same was true for her, though she took breaks to play harspiel whenever the opportunity arose. Gil spent most of his time in the workshop and the orphanage these days; the workshop had to keep functioning even when Lutz's work meant he had to be absent for long periods of time. Gil really was dedicating himself to learning as much as he could about all sorts of things.

In contrast, Delia wasn't given any new work. The reason was simple: she had connections to the High Bishop, and nobody wanted her involved in Myne's important work. Delia couldn't help but feel a little sad about being excluded, but at the same time, having connections to the highest authority in the temple was a great source of pride to her.

"I shall be with the High Priest," Fran announced shortly after third bell rang; he went to help the High Priest with his paperwork even when Myne wasn't around.

Rosina, finally free from paperwork, reached for the harspiel. There would be no work done in the chambers until fourth bell.

Delia left the orphanage director chambers and went straight to the High Bishop's room.

"It's me, Delia. I'm here to give my report to the High Bishop," she said to the gray priest standing in front of his door, and after a short pause, the door opened.

Jenni welcomed her in with a smile.

"I'm sorry, Delia. The High Bishop received an invitation from a

giebe and is presently absent.”

“Didn’t he bring the chalices to the Noble’s Quarter at the end of winter? Surely he’s finished by now. Is there any other reason the High Bishop would need to leave the city now that Spring Prayer is over?” Delia asked, thinking back to the High Bishop’s schedule which she had memorized while in his room, learning to be an apprentice.

Jenni replied that she did not know, but that a southern giebe had invited him over. It seemed a land-owning noble had business with the High Bishop.

“Therefore, I will receive your report in his stead,” Jenni said.

Delia told Jenni that there was a celebration in the lower city somehow related to Myne, and that they gave her a gift of wrapped-up meat. Jenni took notes on a board and, once she was done, looked up at Delia and gave a warm smile.

“Delia, you move so much more elegantly and gracefully now than you did before.”

Delia often received compliments on her efforts to improve from Myne and Rosina, but hearing praise from Jenni made her so much happier. After all, Jenni was living Delia’s dream of receiving the High Bishop’s affections.

“I’m learning to carry myself like Rosina. I want to become the High Bishop’s mistress.”

“Yes, that’s a very good thing to aspire to. How nostalgic... I wonder what Rosina is doing right now?”

Delia went on to detail everything she knew about Rosina, and how she spent her time as Myne’s attendant. She took this opportunity to talk about Wilma from the orphanage as well.

Jenni listened with a bright, beaming smile. “Polish your beauty well, Delia. There will be a noble visitor coming very soon, I believe.”

“Would the High Bishop allow me to welcome them? Oh... But Fran would get in the way. He would never let me come.”

For a moment Delia’s light-blue eyes shone with excitement, but then she remembered her current position and slumped over in disappointment. Jenni watched her with a gentle smile.

“I am told this noble is quite fond of children. Everything will be just fine. The High Bishop will no doubt call for you, Delia.”

If that noble took a liking to Delia, she might not become the High Bishop’s mistress, but rather the mistress of a noble. She might be able to leave the temple. Having realized that this was a real possibility—albeit a very unlikely one—Delia’s heart pounded in her chest as she left the High Bishop’s room. She was so excited over how bright her future was about to become that she missed Jenni’s last whisper.

“The noble is searching for a child who has the Devouring, it seems.”

Lunchtime in the Temple

Lunch began at fourth bell. After seeing the apprentice back to her director chambers, I returned to Lord Ferdinand's room. He allowed me to join him for lunch whenever I was in the temple. At first I had found it incredibly nerve-racking to eat with Lord Ferdinand—so much so that I could hardly even taste the food—but after a whole season of having lunch together, I now had enough composure to actually look forward to our meals.

Because, I mean, every day he serves the kind of food that we laynobles would only eat on special occasions.

"Thank you for having me, Lord Ferdinand."

One of his gray priest attendants let me inside, and I found Lord Ferdinand continuing his work while our meal was being prepared. He acknowledged my entrance with nothing more than a quick glance. The first time I had eaten here I assumed I had interrupted him at a serious moment, but now I knew this was just business as usual.

I headed to Lord Ferdinand's desk, taking care not to get in the way of his attendants as they prepared the food.

"Damuel, what is that board?" Lord Ferdinand asked.

"A list of questions from the apprentice. She said she would like you to answer them when you have the time."

Lord Ferdinand took the board and looked it over, then shook his head and murmured in an exasperated tone, "It seems she has begun reading a fairly old bible..." Then, he immediately started writing his answers.

The apprentice's questions were about unfamiliar words and phrases she had encountered while reading books. The other day she had started reading a copy of a bible written in a dialect of our language so old that not even I could read it—and I graduated from the Royal Academy. No matter how you looked at it, that just wasn't the kind of book a kid who had just finished their baptism would normally want to read. And yet, the apprentice breezed through the pages with a smile on her face, trying to decipher the text by comparing it to a bible that had been written in more modern language.

"She said that it was fun to compare to a modern bible, and just having new words to read was enough to make her happy," I said.

"That girl is always happy when she has a book in her hands."

“I know. The thing that surprised me most after coming to the temple was how obsessed the apprentice is with books.”

The first thing she had done when I was assigned to guard her and she could leave her room was head straight to the book room, which was usually freezing because it didn't even have a furnace. She was sickly enough that she could fall ill in the blink of an eye, and yet nothing thrilled her more than the idea of spending hours reading in a room that most people would be itching to leave as soon as possible.

In the end, Fran and I had to request that Lord Ferdinand let her bring books back to the director chambers, thereby allowing her to read in front of a fireplace. But if not for that, the apprentice no doubt would have spent hour upon hour cooped up in the freezing book room, and I would have been forced to accompany her. That was too close of a call.

“She even brings books to bed when she's sick and bedridden. Despite the fact she needs to rest, she just keeps crying while begging for books until Fran ultimately caves in and lets her have one.”

“I would expect nothing less from that single-minded maniac,” replied Lord Ferdinand as he continued writing down answers to questions about language so archaic that it wasn't even taught at the Royal Academy.

I watched his hands with awe—the rumors my older brother had told me about Lord Ferdinand being on another level were all true. I myself wanted to use this opportunity to learn more about ancient languages, given that I hadn't been able to answer any of the apprentice's questions.

...It would be shameful for a noble like me—a laynoble, sure, but a noble nonetheless—to be less knowledgeable than a commoner apprentice shrine maiden.

It felt somewhat strange that, despite going to the temple as part of my punishment, I was now studying at a higher level than when I was attending the Royal Academy.

“High Priest, Sir Damuel. The food is ready,” announced an attendant, which was my sign to leave his desk.

The table was lined with delicious, beautifully prepared appetizers, already much more extravagant than what I usually ate at the knight barracks and back at home. I sat down, doing my best to keep my stomach from grumbling. It would be a little embarrassing for me to make a noise like that in front of Lord Ferdinand, someone unfathomably above me in every way.

Today's menu seemed to be taschnitz, a bird that had been thoroughly stewed. It only took a glance to see how well cooked it was, and it looked tender enough to melt the second it touched your tongue.

“How was yesterday?” Lord Ferdinand asked as he started eating the food served to him.

It had become a daily routine for me to report what the apprentice had done since our previous lunch. Fran was giving similar reports as the apprentice’s attendant, but Lord Ferdinand liked to gather information from multiple sources and perspectives. And, for the record, this routine was quite important to me; it was unbearable to eat in silence with Lord Ferdinand sitting right across the table.

“Tuuli came to visit yesterday afternoon with some people from the Gilberta Company. They discussed how to keep the workshop running while the apprentice is gone for Spring Prayer,” I replied, slicing off a large piece of the tenderly boiled vargel and slathering it with cream sauce before forking it into my mouth. The smooth flavor of cream mixed with a hint of butter spread through my mouth, and the soft vargel broke apart on my tongue.

Aaaah... Nothing makes me feel the spring quite like vargel with cream sauce.

I was glad to be experiencing spring flavors again, but at the same time it hurt to say goodbye to the parue cakes I had discovered in the orphanage. They were sweets for commoners never seen in the Noble’s Quarter, but their gentle sweetness had truly been delicious. The apprentice had said that they were something to look forward to next year, though she probably hadn’t realized that, by that time, my guard duty in the temple would be over.

...And it would be a little too much for me to mingle with commoners to go hunting for parues. What a shame.

As I thought back to how good the parue cakes tasted, Lord Ferdinand said, “Oh yes,” having seemingly just remembered something. “I have been hearing the name ‘Tuuli’ quite often, but what exactly is it that she does here? Unlike the Gilberta Company, I do not believe there is much for her to do.”

Although Tuuli’s name often came up in reports, she would usually just arrive with the Gilberta Company before leaving almost immediately for the orphanage. It struck me that I never really talked much about her, since it was always those from the Gilberta Company who had important things to say.

Tuuli was apparently the apprentice’s older sister, but she was a normal commoner through and through. They hardly even looked like sisters when you put them side by side. They were obviously close with one another, but their conduct and manner of speaking couldn’t have been more different. It was hard to believe they had grown up together.

“Tuuli practices math and reading in the orphanage, and in return teaches the orphans about sewing and cooking. Now that it’s spring,

her work has resumed and she can only visit every other day, but the regular visits from a family member seem to be helping the apprentice stay quite calm.”

“Excellent. No news could be better than that.”

When the blizzards had gotten so bad that the apprentice’s family couldn’t visit her, she had become so unstable that she started following Lord Ferdinand wherever he went, like a duckling following its parent. When things were especially bad, Lord Ferdinand would have to take the apprentice into his own workshop. He did so with enormous reluctance, but anything that calmed her down was more than welcome.

This workshop was Lord Ferdinand’s hidden room. Hidden rooms were the most personal space a noble had—a place where they could relax and calm themselves down—so, under normal circumstances, they wouldn’t allow other people inside. Very young nobles would register their mana along with their parents so that they could enter too, but after their baptism they would reset the seals to make it a completely personal place that only they could enter. With this in mind, I was really shocked to see Lord Ferdinand letting a complete stranger like the apprentice into his hidden room.

That said, it made sense when he explained that he was letting her use his hidden room since she as a non-noble lacked the ability to make one of her own, and so had no place to safely expel her pent-up feelings. It was one facet of her training on the path to becoming the daughter of a noble, who should show no emotion on the outside.

“Damuel, you have spent one season with Myne now. What do you think about her becoming Karstedt’s adopted daughter?” Lord Ferdinand asked.

I put my knife down for a moment and thought back to how the apprentice had acted over the winter.

“...When I see how much fun she has with her family and the Gilberta Company, then how sad she looks when they leave, it strikes me that separating a girl as young as her from her family would be a tragedy. But considering her enormous supply of mana, the technical expertise she has displayed in managing an increasingly profitable workshop, her acute economic sense, and even her shocking weakness, I don’t think she would be able to survive as a commoner.”

“You think so as well, then,” Lord Ferdinand murmured while bringing his fork to his mouth.

“When I watch her manage the orphanage and workshop up close, it is hard to ignore how abnormal the apprentice is. This is not just the difference between a noble and a commoner; it is as though she is in an entire league of her own.”

Nobles and commoners were strictly delineated by their mana, or

lack thereof, so it was natural that there would be differences between them. But the apprentice was different from both nobles and commoners. It wasn't as simple as asking whether she had mana or not; everything she did, everything she said, and even her very way of thinking was strange. The difference between the apprentice and other commoners was clear when you compared her to her family or those in the Gilberta Company.

"What really surprised me was the apprentice saying that she ran the orphanage's workshop purely out of personal interest. It is unthinkable that a poor commoner would act not for the purpose of survival, but to satisfy a hobby. And on top of that, she is earning an obscene amount of money. Honestly. Even after seeing it myself, I still find it hard to believe."

While guarding the apprentice in her chambers, I had overheard numerous conversations between her and the merchants of the Gilberta Company, and had observed her going through financial ledgers for the workshop with Fran and Gil to calculate profits. Despite not even a year having passed since her baptism, she was earning much more a year than me, a laynoble.

"The apprentice is abnormal in more ways than one and I believe that, if she wants even a little peace in her life, she will need to be put under Lord Karstedt's protection," I concluded.

There wasn't much more you could ask for than the protection of the commander of the Knight's Order, especially given his blood relation to the archduke. I was certain that she would be much happier with him than with some violent and cruel mednoble like Shikza. Not to mention that, if the apprentice became Lord Karstedt's daughter and entered noble society as an archnoble, she could show me her favor and make life easier for me again—like how it was before the blunder I had made. Serving the apprentice wholeheartedly now would certainly make my future brighter, and I couldn't deny the element of self-interest motivating me.

"...That you would advocate for Myne so strongly shows that you have grown quite accustomed to her and the temple. You have a different look in your eyes now than you used to," observed Lord Ferdinand.

I gave a half-smile while eating my taschnitz. The feeling of the meat falling apart in my mouth reminded me of how, at the end of last autumn, it had felt as though my whole life was falling apart. Everything changed for me during that trombe extermination mission.

"I was excited for my first trombe extermination mission, after having to sit out on so many of them before coming of age. I'm just a layknight, but I worked hard to memorize the long prayer for Darkness weapons so that I could help as much as possible."

“I do recall the rookies getting excited about the first time they are permitted to use Darkness weapons on an extermination mission,” said Lord Ferdinand with a slight smile. It seemed that even he had been excited for his first true mission as a knight, and could sympathize with how I felt. That made me feel really warm for some reason.

“It made sense that Lord Karstedt would pick me as a guard. I had just finished my time as an apprentice; I had never exterminated a trombe before; and, as a laynoble, I didn’t have much mana. But to this day, I still wish he hadn’t paired me with Shikza.”

Shikza had been a mednoble, but he was one of those who had returned from the temple after the Sovereignty’s political upheaval. As a former priest without much mana, noble society treated him with scorn and derision, and so his one solace was lording power over those below him in status—laynobles. No matter how much I hated it, no matter how much it frustrated me, a laynoble like me could never defy a mednoble.

“Shikza treated his status as a shield—something that would allow him to get away with harming the apprentice. Even though I was only demoted rather than executed for allowing that to happen, my life still hit rock bottom. I was forced to go into debt to my older brother to cover my share of the apprentice’s robes; my fiancée from another duchy ended our engagement due to me being reduced to the rank of an apprentice; and, on top of everything, my new assignment was to serve a commoner apprentice in the temple where those without mana went. It was so terrible that not even my knight comrades could laugh about it.”

My position as a noble truly had collapsed overnight. Everyone offered me their sympathy given that I had only ended up in this position because of Shikza, but that didn’t help my situation. My name would be forever stained as the knight who messed up on the job and was sent to the temple.

After I finished telling my sorrowful tale as interestingly as I could, Lord Ferdinand set down his cutlery and gave me a serious look.

“I do think that you were unfortunate, and that the disaster that befell you was unwarranted. But I do not think it is accurate to say that you were punished purely because of Shikza’s actions. You have your own sins, and it seems to me that you are not very aware of them.”

...*My own sins*? From my perspective, I had just gotten wrapped up in somebody else’s mess. My comrades had said that I was unlucky and the like, but they never said I was at fault.

“What would you have a layknight such as myself do to an angry

medknight like Shikza?" I asked, sullen confusion slipping into my voice, "Laynobles have no choice but to obey those above them in status. What else could I have done?"

Lord Ferdinand raised an eyebrow. "Damuel, you should have used rott as soon as you realized you couldn't stop Shikza."

"Rott" was the red light one summoned from their schtappe to call for aid. Lord Ferdinand said that I should have used it to call over the knights fighting the trombe to protect the apprentice, but if it was between protecting a commoner shrine maiden and exterminating a large, deadly trombe, it seemed to me that the trombe was the greater priority.

"...I didn't even consider using rott."

"I believe you would have used rott if you were guarding an archnoble or the daughter of another duchy's archduke. Am I wrong?"

He wasn't. Had I been guarding an archnoble's daughter, I would have thrown myself upon Shikza's blade to stop it, and if physical force failed I would have used rott. In other words, a part of me had been looking down on the apprentice for being a commoner just like Shikza had. A chill ran down my spine.

"You would do well to always treat the subjects you're guarding as being above yourself. When put in a situation beyond your control, you should first use rott. Before submitting to the domineering of a mednoble, call for the aid of those higher in status to yourself. You did neither. You timidly submitted rather than fulfilling your duty, and you are now bemoaning your situation as nothing more than the product of poor fortune. Those are your sins."

Despite Lord Ferdinand's harsh expression, his voice was surprisingly gentle. He was confirming that he would come to help me if I ever called for aid. My eyes widened. An archnoble had never offered to help me before.

"...Your services will likely be in great need during the Spring Prayer three days from now. There are many unsettling rumors stirring around. Know well that unnecessary pride and cowardice will prove to be of no use during missions."

"Yes, sir! This time for sure, I *will* protect the apprentice."

We finished lunch, and as I prepared to return to the director chambers, Lord Ferdinand stopped me.

"Before you go, I remember you saying that you were forced to borrow money from your older brother. Is everything quite alright?"

...No, *not at all*.

Being demoted to an apprentice meant that, naturally, my pay was back down to the rate of an apprentice as well, and I had already spent all of my savings on bridewealth back when I was engaged. I

asked whether they could give some of it back, but my older brother had said that they probably wouldn't since the engagement was annulled due to my own failings. And even if they had, it probably wouldn't have been of much use in paying off my debt.

"To be honest, I'm even worse off financially than when I was a student at the Royal Academy, since now I can't even get extra money from copying books or selling the study guides I wrote."

"Copying books and selling study guides...? Why was a knight such as yourself doing the work of a scholar-official?" Lord Ferdinand asked, the surprise in his tone making me lower my gaze to the floor.

Most knights earned their money by hunting fey beings—feybeasts, feyplants, and the like—and then selling the feystones and materials gained by doing so. But we layknights lacked the wealth of mana that archnobles enjoyed, which made it hard for us to kill the stronger feybeasts. In turn, that made it hard for us to get good materials, and the low-quality materials we *could* get weren't worth much at all.

"It was much more efficient for me to write a study guide for the knight course than for me to hunt for materials."

"Interesting... If people are willing to pay good money for one of your study guides, then am I right to assume you are capable of doing the work of a scholar?" Lord Ferdinand asked.

I nodded. I had earned a small amount of money whenever I returned home by helping my older brother with his work. It wasn't as though I had any qualms about doing scholarly work; after discussing my future with my scholar-official older brother, I simply decided to be a knight to differentiate myself from him and expand the reach of our family.

Ferdinand blinked his light-gold eyes in surprise, then gave a small grin. "Damuel, what say you assist me alongside Myne once you return from Spring Prayer? I will pay you a fair wage."

...Ngh!

The words "fair wage" stirred my heart, but I couldn't allow myself to falter here. He may have been setting a trap, and I wasn't a scholar, I was a knight.

"Lord Ferdinand, I appreciate the offer, but I am not a scholar."

"Do you not think it important to efficiently earn money by utilizing your talents?"

"It is, but I am the apprentice's bodyguard. I couldn't take on more work while I'm in the middle of serving my punishment..."

I could feel myself being torn between my pride as a knight and the harshness of my current reality. I was dying for more money; my financial situation really couldn't have been worse.

Lord Ferdinand's eyes narrowed with amusement, as though he

could see right through my internal struggle. “Naturally, you would only be working as a scholar while Myne is in my room. I think it is safe to say that I would be able to protect her from any danger myself while she is here.”

I fell silent, unable to argue even when he flat-out stated that he was stronger than me. Lord Ferdinand used the opportunity to start scratching some numbers onto a board.

“You know how busy I am with work by now, I imagine. I could use all the skilled help I can get. Hm... What say you to this wage, for working from third to fourth bell? A raise is not out of the question if you perform well.”

The wage he showed me was roughly equivalent to how much an adult layknight earned, assuming I worked for a month straight. It was more money than I could earn doing anything else while imprisoned as a bodyguard within the temple. The wages of an apprentice truly were sparse; nothing could be better than doing another job on the side of my guarding.

I swallowed hard. “...I-I think I’ll take you up on that offer.”

I chose reality over my pride as a knight, and Lord Ferdinand nodded without mocking me in the least.

“Use this opportunity well. If you do not repay your debt soon, I imagine you will be unable to find a new fiancée even after returning to noble society, no?”

Hearing that hurt, but I knew Lord Ferdinand was just trying to cheer me up. But even then, finding a new fiancée wasn’t just a question of how much money I had.

...What kind of girl will want to marry a guy who only just left the temple?!

The Title of “Gutenberg”

“Everything ready, Gutenberg?”

“Would you stop calling me that?!”

“Third bell’s gonna ring soon if we don’t get a move on. C’mon! Let’s go, Gutenberg.”

The foreman put the goods into a bag and threw open the door, brushing off my protests with a chuckle. I followed him, the heavy box of metal letter types in my arms and a sharp frown on my face. Today I would be presenting the fruits of my leherl task to the Smithing Guild. Everyone else in the workshop saw us off with grins.

“Hey, Gutenberg, be sure to really sell those types of yours to ‘em.”

“My name’s Johann! Quit calling me ‘Gutenberg’!”

“Heheh! Not everyone gets a special title from their patron, y’know. That’s somethin’ you should brag to the guild about.”

...Ngh! Why does everyone have to make fun of me?!

Thanks to the foreman, even my guild mates were calling me “Gutenberg” now. Or rather, I should say it was all thanks to Myne, my one and only patron. As I carried the heavy box, I thought back to the day she had given me my title.

It all happened when I went to the Gilberta Company to present my leherl task to them. I always asked so many questions about the orders I received that no customer except Myne was willing to be my patron. She was tiny and didn’t even look old enough to have been baptized yet, but I guess looks can be deceiving. Besides, it was easy to forget she was a little girl when she was answering questions about her orders, providing blueprints, and paying for what she needed.

In the end, her task for me was making metal letter types. I had to make each letter according to her exact specifications, which was as rewarding as it was immensely difficult.

...I wonder if Lady Myne will like them, I’d thought as I removed the cloth covering the box and unveiled the letter types to my one and only patron, fearfully awaiting the appraisal that would decide my future.

“Wow...”

Myne looked at the letter types, her golden eyes trembling. She had the pale white skin of one who never went out in the sun, which

made the fact that her cheeks had flushed with color even more evident. The way she put a hand to her chest while sighing made her look entirely like a girl in love, and there was a certain intensity about her gaze that seemed unnatural for a little girl to have.

She timidly picked up one of the letter types and rolled it around in her tiny palm, looking at it as though it were the greatest treasure in the world.

...I guess it's safe to say she likes them, then.

The moment I let out a sigh of relief, Myne's wavering eyes of joy hardened as she adopted a more calm and critical expression. She took out a second letter type and lined them both up on the table before lowering her head to look at them straight on. Then she narrowed her eyes and began measuring their thickness and height, checking for any differences.

A-Are they going to be okay?

I grew fearful again, until she gave me her appraisal.

"They're wonderful! You truly have become Gutenberg!"

"Wha?"

"Johann, I award you the title of 'Gutenberg!'"

...Guten-what now?

I dropped my jaw like a fool as I stared at Myne. Her presence as a delicate and frail princess—a beautiful, pale flower sheltered from the world—had just shattered violently before my very eyes.

Lutz tried to calm her down, but Myne's excitement was unstoppable. She brushed him right off and launched out of her chair, talking as fast as she could, her cheeks now even more flushed.

"I mean, this is the beginning of the printing age! You're literally bearing witness to the exact moment history was changed forever! This is the second coming of Gutenberg! His first name was Johannes, and now he's changing history as Johann! What a splendid coincidence! A fateful meeting of legend! Praise be to the gods!"

...Yeah, I have absolutely no idea what she's talking about.



I had been forced to make the same weird pose back at my coming of age ceremony in the temple, but this was my first time seeing someone strike it and pray to the gods in normal life. Everyone was stunned, but Myne didn't stop there.

"Gutenberg is a legendary craftsman on the level of a god whose work changed history and books forever. Johann is indeed this city's Gutenberg!"

Before I could fully process the extreme weight of the title she had given me, Myne started giving Benno and Lutz the same one. My comrades were increasing before my eyes. And yet, my main concern was someone stopping her and putting an end to this awkward atmosphere.

I glanced at the servant standing behind Myne, who had kind of a self-important look on his face, just as Myne struck the pose again and praised Metisonora, the Goddess of Wisdom! It was then that she fell forward, still striking the pose with a happy smile on her face. She hit the ground and fell still; for a second, an uncomfortable silence filled the room.

"...Wha?! Lady Myne?!"

"Girl, are you okay?!"

"Wh-What's going on?!"

Out of everyone there, only the servant guarding her, the foreman, and myself stood up in shock. The servant hurriedly knelt beside her, checking up on her as the foreman and I watched nervously. But everyone else just gave heavy sighs.

"Took her long enough. Now I can finally have some peace and quiet again," Benno said, not even moving from his chair. He, Lutz, and even her other servants seemed entirely unfazed.

"Fran, just lay her down on that bench over there. She's gonna be going back on the carriage anyway."

"As you wish. Excuse me, Sir Damuel." The servant called Fran picked up the unconscious Myne and carried her to the bench by the fireplace for some reason, then laid her down and rested a thick, warm-looking coat over her. The process was so swift and calm that it was entirely like they had all predicted this would happen.

While I was still at a loss for words, Benno drummed his fingers against the table. "Let's start the appraisal, then. I'll take care of this as Myne's backer since she's passed out. Alright?"

"Huh...? You're just going to leave her like that?"

I glanced at Myne lying unconscious on the bench, wondering whether it was okay to do nothing about a little girl who had just fallen unconscious out of nowhere. It sure didn't seem right.

"Whaddaya think, Lutz?"

“She’ll probably wake up around sunset. I would guess she’ll have a big fever when she wakes up, but she has only herself to blame for that,” Lutz said flatly, giving a small shrug. He seemed pretty used to dealing with Myne.

“How many days will this one last?” Fran asked.

“...Depends on how long she stays this excited. I’ve got no idea, since I’ve never seen her get this crazy.”

Judging by their conversation, I could tell it wasn’t that uncommon for Myne to collapse. I wish I had known that sooner, though; I was sure I was going to have a heart attack for a second there.

“Anyway, this should be an easy appraisal. Anything that makes a patron pass out with joy should pass with flying colors, I’d say.”

“Yeah, wasn’t hard to see how excited she was,” said the foreman. “Your appraisal will do, Benno. Though I gotta say, I would’ve liked to know what these are even used for.”

As the foreman looked over the letter types, Myne’s younger servant snapped his head up in sudden realization and took out what he had been carrying.

“I’ll demonstrate. Sister Myne told me to prepare for this.”

“What’re you gonna do, Gil?”

“I’m gonna put ink on them and print something. Duh. Heheh.”

Gil, looking excited, nimbly took out the tools he needed. He lined up the roller, paper, ink, and some circular thing I had never seen before on the table. The roller I had previously made for Myne was now completely black, and judging by the fact that Gil was now covering it with ink, I could guess why.

“According to Sister Myne, you would line up the letter types and make a page of text with them. Then you put ink on them like this,” explained Gil as he ran the roller over the letter types, turning them from gleaming silver to a sticky black.

“Woah, woah, woah!” I reflexively cried out at the sight of Gil dirtying up Myne’s letter types without her permission but he just ignored my yells, placing a sheet of paper over the types.

“For actual printing we’d use some kind of press thing to push the ink on, but since this is just a demonstration of the letter types, I’ll be using this baren thing instead,” Gil explained proudly as he pressed the flat, round thing against the top of the paper, rubbing it in circles. It seemed I was the only one feeling sick with horror; everyone else peered at Gil’s work with great interest.

“Once the ink’s on the paper, you peel it off of the types and let it dry.”

Gil removed the paper, showing that it had rows of distinct letters printed in black ink. He repeated the process using another sheet,

making an identical copy. A wide grin on his face, Gil then held the two pieces of paper side by side and showed them to us.

...So what? I don't get what's so impressive. That looks like a waste of paper to me, I thought.

But, looking around the room, it was pretty clear that I was the only one who had that opinion. Benno, the foreman, and Myne's guard all developed hard expressions the second they saw the pages.

Myne's bodyguard Damuel looked particularly taken aback; he was closely examining the two sheets with a deadly serious look in his eyes.

"You finished two pages that quickly?" he said, "I can't believe it."

Meanwhile, the foreman had picked up a few of the unused letter types, lining them up in his palm before grunting.

"Each type is just a single letter, so it's easy to mix 'em around and make whatever text you need."

"She did say it would be much, *much* faster than cutting out stencils each time," Lutz said, making everyone furrow their brows even harder.

"Myne was right. This *will* change history. I knew about printing, but I didn't realize it'd be this easy to swap around the letters." Benno sighed and shook his head. "Just what has that idiot done this time...?"

Benno's words spoke for everyone, as they all collectively looked at Myne, still unconscious on the bench. They seemed to know what was going on, but I sure didn't. All I knew was that, by taking Myne on as my patron, I had gotten wrapped up in something that there'd be no return from.

"Myne had said she'd start making the printing press now, so I'm gonna guess it'll be a while before she makes a lot of them and things really start to happen," Benno said in a brighter tone, but the foreman shook his head with a conflicted expression.

"She said she was gonna order it from a carpentry workshop. That means she already has a good idea of how to make one. If she can make a detailed blueprint like the ones she gives Johann, it won't be long before that printing press is done."

Myne's blueprints were always very thorough and precise, especially the ones she made for me since she knew I liked to have all of the relevant details. If the carpentry workshop was given a blueprint like that, they would have the press done in no time.

Benno scratched his head. "True, but it'll be some time before the influence of the printing press really starts being felt. This is still the only city with plant paper workshops, and we've only just signed a contract for the ink guild to start making the ink for that paper. There's a massive lack of resources here; we can't keep up with the

presses. But, well... given that the workshops in other cities will start opening up again in the spring, it'll only be a matter of time before everything changes."

Then, he shot me a sharp glare. The sudden intensity was such a one-eighty from his previous relaxed attitude that I actually gasped.

"Johann, you're gonna be known as 'Gutenberg' from now on. Myne gave you the title herself, and don't think you've got any chance of getting away from her now," Benno said, still staring daggers into me.

Unable to think of anything to say in response, I just bobbed my head up and down. *I'm terrified. I'll make anything she wants, so please, let me live.*

Benno gave a satisfied nod, the voice of my heart having apparently been heard loud and clear.

"Good."

...Not like I have any other patrons to run away to, anyway.

I pursed my lips at the memory of what had happened at the Gilberta Company, at which point the foreman told me that we'd be going back there to report whatever the guild said about the types. I jerked in surprise, thinking for a second that he had read my thoughts, but that was silly.

Together, we walked into the Smithing Guild. It was located in the heart of the city, which described the square surrounding the central plaza. There were lots of guilds in that square, with the Merchant's Guild being the big daddy of them all.

The southwestern section of the square was where the craftsmen guilds were, like the Smithing Guild, the Carpentry Guild, and the Construction Guild. The Tailor's Guild and Dyeing Guild were in the northwest, while the Inn Guild and Eatery Guild were to the southeast. In the northeast was the Merchant's Guild and a meeting building for soldiers. And now that it was spring again, the heart of the city was bustling with people coming to and going from all of these different guilds.

We stepped into the Smithing Guild, which was just as busy as expected. Some people were here to sell, having brought along things they had made as winter handiwork, while others like me had come with their leherl tasks. It was quite the commotion.

"Heya, Johann. I heard you found a patron, huh? Congrats," said the receptionist, who had been worried about me in the past. My desperate hunt for a patron was well-known in the Smithing Guild.

I lifted up the box of letter types a little so that he could see it. "Yeah. They gave a good appraisal for my task, too. Things are finally looking up for me."

By finding a patron and receiving a good appraisal for their completed task, I had avoided having my leherl contract nullified. I still needed to show my task to the Smithing Guild so that they could appraise it themselves, but I would be fine no matter what they said; keeping my leherl contract safe was all that mattered to me at this point.

“That’s all that matters to you, huh? You sure don’t have much ambition for a man of your talents,” said the receptionist.

People told me that a lot, but I really didn’t agree. It was a simple matter of fact that my appraisal from the Smithing Guild wouldn’t affect how likely I was to secure more patrons, no matter how good or bad it was. After all, it didn’t matter how highly the workshop or the guild valued my work if our customers didn’t share that opinion.

The foreman and I moved on to the second floor, where we saw a crowd of leherls. They had presumably just come of age as well, as each one was holding their completed task as they waited alongside their foreman.

“Well, well, well. I see that, despite all your fussing about not having a patron, you still ended up getting a task,” said a young man with short, scarlet-colored hair, a defiant look in his gray eyes.

Judging by the fact he was here, we were either the same age or just a year apart. I couldn’t say for sure, though, since the amount of time it took to find a patron and then complete their task varied from person to person.

...Who is this guy?

I sometimes went outside to buy materials or deliver orders at the request of the foreman or my coworkers, but I generally spent all of my time holed up in the workshop. To be honest, I barely knew anybody. The foreman always yelled at me about that, saying it was one of the main reasons it had been so hard for me to find a patron.

“I don’t know what your task was, but it won’t be better than what I made,” the scarlet-haired boy continued.

I didn’t really know what to say to that, especially when it was coming from someone I didn’t know. All I could do was stammer out a “S-Sure.”

The guy snorted, then sped back to his foreman.

“What was that all about?”

“That’s Zack from Verde’s Workshop,” said the foreman. “He sees you as a rival. Y’know that everyone’s tense to see who gets the best appraisals and all that, right? Don’t be an idiot. If someone comes looking for a fight, give’m one!”

The foreman’s words caught my interest. Verde’s Workshop was the most popular and busy smithy in the whole city; if this Zack was a leherl there, it was safe to say he was a pretty skilled smith.

...Oh yeah, I think I remember the foreman telling me a long time ago that there was a smith my age that's pretty good too.

Third bell rang, and several employees from the Smithing Guild entered the room to appraise our tasks. We brought ours over when we were called, explained what work we had been doing for the patron, what they had ordered, and how they had appraised our task. I showed them our purchase orders and the written appraisal to confirm that everything was legitimate.

"Those sure are a lot of supply orders."

Myne certainly had ordered a great many things in the short time we had known each other. Most patrons didn't order so many items in a row, and most certainly didn't order things as weird as Myne did.

"Myne values Johann's technical ability a lot. Her orders are always incredibly precise," said the foreman as he spread out one of the blueprints Myne had given me. Each employee at the guild was a smith themselves, so they could tell how precise the orders were by looking at the blueprints.

"But who's this 'Forewoman Myne'? I've never heard of her before. Which workshop does she run?" one of the guild employees asked with his brow furrowed upon seeing Myne's signature on the boards. Unfortunately, it was only then that I realized I didn't even know what my patron's workshop was.

"U-Uhh..." I started to falter, but the foreman put a hand on my shoulder and pointed at the appraisal board.

"Forewoman Myne's underage, and Benno from the Gilberta Company's her guardian. Ask that kinda question to him or the Merchant's Guild."

"The Gilberta Company's backing her?" murmured the employees, a clear sense of awe in their voices as they looked at Benno's name on the board.

The Gilberta Company was one of the largest stores in Ehrenfest. It wasn't an old company with a storied history, but it was growing by the day and a lot of money passed through there. Myne being backed by them meant she was a very big deal when it came to patrons.

"Alright, let's see your task," said one employee after confirming that there were no problems with my patron. I removed the cloth from the box and showed them the letter types inside.

"What the heck are these?"

...Yeah, that was my first reaction too.

Even after Gil had taught us how the metal letter types were used, I still didn't really see what made them so valuable. I would have bet that there wasn't a single craftsman who could tell what they were worth at a glance.

"They're called letter types. They're pieces of metal with letters

protruding out of them. Johann, explain the order.”

“Yes, sir. The important thing about this order is that each type had to be exactly identical in size. They all needed to be the same height so that they would line up perfectly flat when put next to each other, like this.” I took out a few letter types and lined them up next to each other, then lowered my head to see them at eye-level like Myne had done. The employees did the same as they were looking the types over.

“That’s a pretty precise job.”

“I was told they would break easily if they don’t line up perfectly.”

They couldn’t tell what the letter types were supposed to be used for, but they could appreciate how hard they had been to make. The employees nodded, impressed, and congratulated me on being able to do such precise work.

“According to the Gilberta Company, this is an invention that’s gonna change history,” said the foreman. He was just repeating what Benno had said, and the reactions to his claim were pretty divided; some laughed, clearly having taken it as a joke, while others paled as they considered the possibility of those words being true.

“Johann was even given the title of ‘Gutenberg’ for making these. Apparently that’s a title given to great men and women whose accomplishments have changed history. Johann and the Gilberta Company’s bosses are both the Gutenbergs of Ehrenfest now,” said the foreman in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear. A stir ran through the crowd, and I fought back the urge to curl up into a ball and die of embarrassment.

“So, how’d it go?” asked Benno.

After getting my task appraised at the Smithing Guild, the foreman and I had gone back to the Gilberta Company. We needed to deliver the letter types to Myne and report what the Smithing Guild had said about them. Once there, we were taken to the same office as before, where Benno asked us his question.

“Johann got the highest marks. Not that I expected anything different; no other apprentice would have been tasked to make something that required that much precision.”

I only had a single patron, but I had completed several orders for her, each of which had me making an unusual thing that required a high level of technical expertise to complete. And then there was the high price they ran. The fact that she had given me a title meant a lot too. The foreman and everyone else in the workshop made fun of me for it, but in the outside world, having a title was a great honor.

...Not that I want any honor!

Due to everyone going overboard about me being given the title of ‘Gutenberg,’ Zack had come in second place behind me—suffice it to say, that did not do me any favors, and his enmity for me had only grown stronger. He barked at the guild employees, saying it wasn’t right that I should be praised so highly after having had a bad reputation and no patron for such a long time.

...Believe me, Zack, I would give you this “Gutenberg” title in a second if I could. I want to make things that satisfy my patrons, and I want to develop all of the skills I’ll need to accomplish that, but I don’t care about any titles.

“No need to grimace like that, Johann. A good appraisal is real important,” said the foreman as he patted my shoulder.

Mark nodded in agreement. “Your foreman is correct. A positive reputation is important for keeping a workshop running. As a *leherl*, you must consider what’s best for the future of your workshop.”

I was always so focused on improving my own skills that I never really thought about the future of my workshop or its place within the Smithing Guild. It seemed that I would need to change that if I wanted to be a proper *leherl*.

“But y’know, merchants and craftsmen are different. You just focus on making some good stuff, Johann. That alone’ll help our workshop’s reputation. Don’t sweat it, I’ll make sure the workshop is run by people who are good at it. Hone your skills and just find another patron that appreciates your skillset like Myne does.”

“...Boss.”

The foreman always went all-out when teasing me, but he had a reliable side to him as well. Getting somewhat emotional, I resolved to improve my skills even further.

Mark gave a peaceful smile. “In that case, Johann, please enjoy these opportunities to hone your skills. They are from Myne,” he said, holding out several sheets of folded paper to me.

I opened them cautiously. They were work orders containing detailed blueprints. “Huh?!”

The blueprints described even more letter types. Some had blank surfaces, and others had symbols on them. I squeezed the papers with trembling hands, having not expected at all that my letter type hell wasn’t over yet.

“What... What are these?”

“Sister Myne provided these as a follow-up order for when you finished the initial one with satisfactory results. It seems that once you finish these symbols, she will order letter types of different sizes. Good luck,” Mark said with an encouraging smile.

But I wasn’t happy at all. His smile looked entirely like the smile of a person pushing tedious work onto someone else.

“You sure got one hell of a patron, huh?” The foreman plopped a hand onto my shoulder, which at the moment felt like it weighed more than the world. I turned around and saw that his eyes were gleaming with amusement. “Your name’s gonna be carved into history for sure if you finish all of these orders, Gutenberg.”

“Boss, please don’t call me that!” I groaned, cradling my head in my hands. “And I’d just felt some respect for you, too. Give it all back!”

Lutz gave a shrug. “You ran out of luck the day Myne found you. Give it up, Gutenberg.”

“You’re the first one she gave the title to, Johann. You’re the true Gutenberg,” Benno said with a serious expression.

That was a terrifying idea. They would all escape from the title unless I made a stand here. I needed to drag them down with me... Or rather, I didn’t want my allies running from their duty. I understood what I needed to do.

“Lutz, Benno, we’re all Gutenbergs here. Lady Myne said so herself!”

Benno clicked his tongue and glared at me, but I had no intention whatsoever of bearing the title’s burden all by myself.

“Actually, I think you should be the head Gutenberg, Benno. You’re the oldest and richest of all of us.”

“Nope. Nice try, Johann. It’s time you learn that whoever’s first loses.”

“What kind of logic is that?!”

In the end, we didn’t manage to settle on who the head Gutenberg was. When I later suggested to Myne that Benno should be the head Gutenberg, she replied like so:

“Don’t worry. You’re all Gutenbergs together. Nobody’s above or below anybody else.”

...No! That’s not the answer I wanted.

Historians of the future would state that this moment was when the Gutenberg Group—the disciples of Metisonora, the Goddess of Wisdom, who would dedicate their lives to developing the printing process and filling the world with books—was born in Ehrenfest.

Afterword

Hello again. It's me, Miya Kazuki. Thank you very much for reading *Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 2 Volume 3*.

The young Johann steeled his resolve and took Myne as his patron, leading to him making metal letter types, and Myne was overjoyed to take her first big step toward real printing. The Gutenbergs will continue to be dragged all over the place by... excuse me, they and Myne will continue to link hands and work together to advance printing as far as possible with the guidance of Metisonora, the Goddess of Wisdom.

Right after the High Priest searches Myne's memories and she resolves to treasure her family more, Myne is forced to hole up inside the temple early due to the suspicious actions of the Ink Guild. Her attendants serve her diligently, but never comfort her, leading to Myne feeling a sense of desolate isolation. Blizzards stop her from seeing her family at all and, to make matters worse, discussions of her being adopted by a noble proceed regardless of what Myne herself wants, making her miss her family even more.

Myne traveled around Ehrenfest for the first time in this volume. You can tell how much bigger the world has gotten if you compare the map in this volume to the map in *Part 1 Volume 1*. I worked surprisingly hard to make this updated map, so I hope it helped everyone appreciate the scale of the world.

The two short stories in this volume focused on Damuel and Johann. They both share an inescapable fate of being dragged around by Myne no matter how much they weep or struggle. (Hahaha.) I hope you enjoyed seeing Johan's title of 'Gutenberg' spread through the Smithing Guild too, and learning more about Damuel's situation in the temple.

Now, I really have to thank TO Books for accommodating my request to add a map to this volume. I asked for it at the last possible second, and I'm really grateful they went through with it.

This volume's cover art shows Myne wearing the light-green dress she wore during Spring Prayer. You can tell that Myne's gotten really rich now just by looking at how much her clothes change on the covers.

Sylvester made his first appearance in this volume, and I was honestly moved by how perfectly the art matched how I pictured him

in my head. You Shiina-sama, thank you very much.

And finally, I offer my deepest thanks to everyone who read this book. May we meet again in the next volume.

February 2016, Miya Kazuki







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Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 2 Apprentice Shrine Maiden
Volume 3
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